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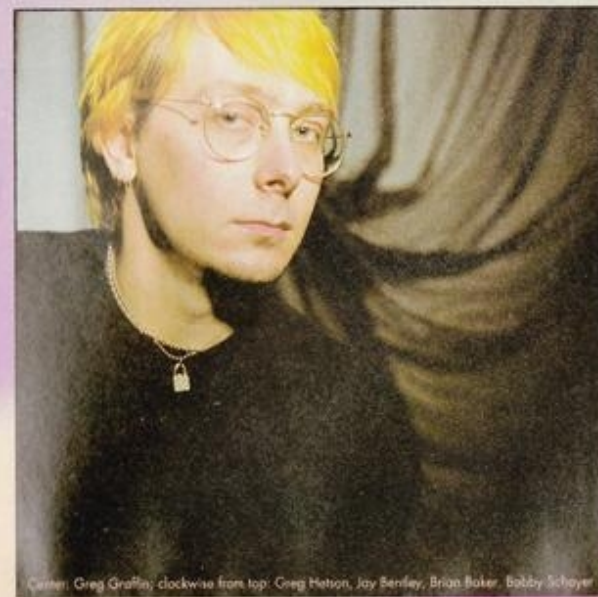
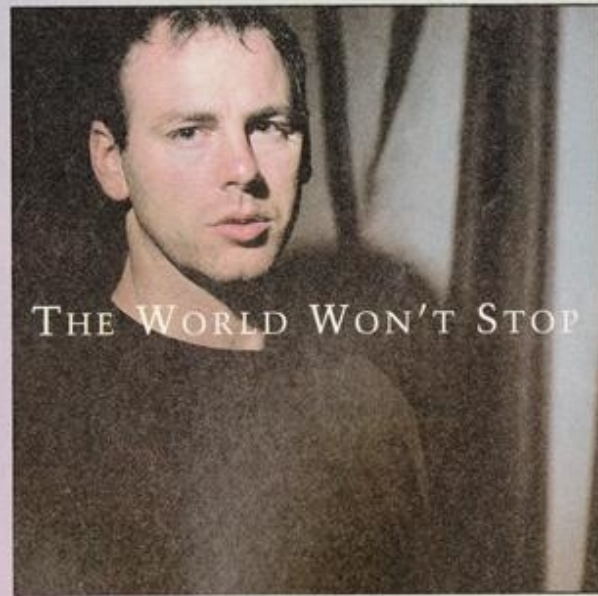
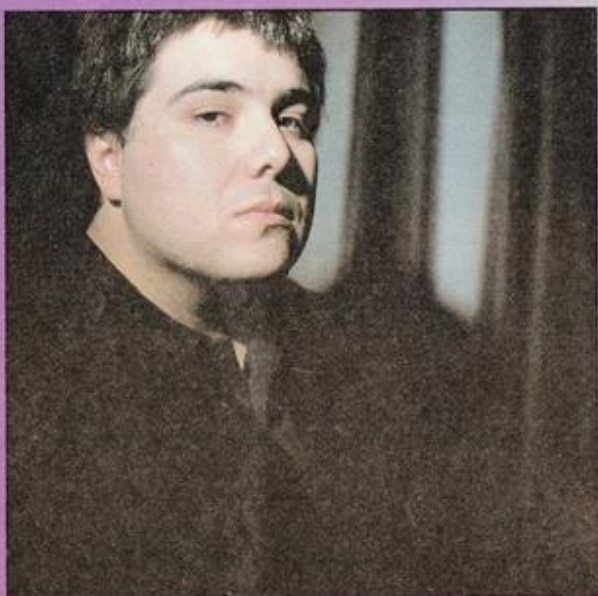
A Free Music Lesson
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Shudder To Think Difficult
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Lords of Acid

Wet Dreams with a Beat






Cover: Greg Graffin; clockwise from top: Greg Hetson, Jay Benfey, Brian Baker, Bobby Schayer

BAD RELIGION

BOTH BAD RELIGION'S SUCCESS AND THE LIVES OF ITS MEMBERS SEEM INEXTRICABLY WRAPPED UP IN PUNK ROCK'S COMING OF AGE.

DAVID GRAD TRAVELS TO GERMANY TO OBSERVE THE BAND'S PROMINENCE IN THE PUNK ROCK PANTHEON. PHOTO EXCURSION BY LEE LOCKE.



"I feel guilty telling these kids not to want all the benefits of an affluent society. But then maybe it's good to tell them that there's no happiness in that dream."

Bad Religion's Greg Graffin surveys the ragged audience before a show in Leipzig, a dying industrial town in the heart of what used to be East Germany. These kids are the heirs to the socialist dream turned nightmare. When the Berlin Wall came down, people left Leipzig in droves for the supposed riches of the West, only to find unemployment and further disillusionment. For this Leipzig audience, when it comes to saying, "There's no future," it's no punk affectation, it's the real thing.

The replacement of statues of Lenin with McDonald's Golden Arches seems to only accentuate the former East Germany's moral decay, and tonight, in an aging institutional-green auditorium, the kids are making an ideology out of despair by enthusiastically embracing punk's rage. Bad Religion seem to instantly bond with the crowd's primal anger, performing one of their best shows of the tour. Graffin even seems to forget that his voice has been on the verge of giving out and harangues the crowd with characteristic masterful abandon.

Ironically, the very forces that caused such an upheaval in these kids' world are what brought Bad Religion to Leipzig in the first place. The band is touring on behalf of its new CD, *Stranger Than Fiction*, its tenth

release but the first to appear exclusively on a major label. The power of the corporate forces which brought down the Wall are causing other barriers to crumble as well. Punk rock, typically the domain of small independent and do-it-yourself labels, has become big business. This new, commercially successful punk is personified by the Top Ten sales of Green Day and the Offspring, whose blend of harmony amidst a maelstrom of guitars was pioneered by bands like Bad Religion over a decade ago.

Bad Religion's place in the punk pantheon is underscored by the sense of betrayal felt by some of their fans when they signed on with Atlantic Records. In Germany, t-shirts were on sale with the band's "cross-buster" logo with the words "THIS ISN'T PUNK ROCK IT'S SONY" printed beneath. But the "What is punk?" issue becomes more complex when bands like the Offspring sell over two million records on an independent label. For Bad Religion, this particular accomplishment has more than a symbolic significance, because the big breakthrough was accomplished on Epitaph, the band's own former label, owned by Brett Gurewitz—the same "Mr. Brett" who, with Graffin, has written all of all the band's material. With the success of his label, Gurewitz left the band he helped found. The fortunes of Bad Religion and the lives of its members seem inextricably wrapped up in punk rock's coming of age.

Meanwhile, the decaying Stalinist architecture in Leipzig is a long way from the band's origins in the affluent San Fernando valley outside of L.A. Stretching out on the tour bus prior to tonight's show, Graffin talks about how a conservative-looking, all-American guy got into punk rock in the first place.

"I grew up in Wisconsin and was your average Wisconsin kid," he explains. "I played a lot of sports and ate a lot of ice cream but at eleven I moved to L.A. You can imagine the shock of moving to the 'Valley' right at the height of pot-smoking, rock-and-roll culture, where people in my Junior High were getting wasted right before class. I really felt like a total outcast. My

idea of fun was sledding with the neighborhood kids or going to the state fair. What saved me was that I'd always loved music, and moving to L.A. forced me to establish my musical identity. I looked for other types of music that weren't pot-related. That's how I found punk rock."

Graffin's punk and antidrug association may leave those familiar with Darby Crash (lead singer of the Germs who died of a heroin overdose) scratching their heads. But he's right that bands like the Germs, Black Flag and the Circle Jerks created an alternative to the burned-out, hippie-youth culture that had been firmly entrenched in L.A. since the '60s. These and many other legendary punk bands put an edge of resent-

ment and seething anger back into music, and created a vibrant underground that prided itself on instilling fear in all good God-fearing folk.

But outside of Hollywood it remained a select fraternity. Jay Bentley, Graffin's best friend in high school, claims that aside from the two of them, there were only about ten other despised punks in the Valley, an area encompassing six million people. "By the time I was fifteen," Graffin explains, "I had cut my hair, I was hanging out in Hollywood every night, and in the afternoons I played in a band, which we had formed in 1980 under the siege of persecution," he adds wryly. That band would become Bad Religion, and contained Bentley on bass and Graffin on vocals. They

were joined by guitarist Brett Gurewitz and drummer Jay Ziskrout, punk converts who had disbanded their new-wave combo the Quarks upon hearing the Ramones.

When it comes to the source of Bad Religion's brand of rage, Bentley gives what has now become an almost classic description of teenage despair in the American wasteland: "What were we so pissed about? Obviously, we weren't getting beaten every day or eating government cheese, so maybe we were just pissed off about the sterility of it all. How everybody lived in the same type of middle-class tract housing, went to work, came home, drank their martini, and went to shop at the mall." This could be the chorus to a thou-



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sand punk tunes, yet Bad Religion would go on to put a unique slant on their callow alienation.

By the early '80s, punk had evolved into hardcore. Its stripped-down style and avowed purpose of putting the guitar solo on the endangered species list are just some of the genre's fine qualities, but offering a surplus of verbal agility isn't one of them. Bad Religion were an exception to the rule. Graffin's voice is exceptionally clean and resonant, perfect for enunciating the polysyllabic words that both he and Gurewitz sprinkled amidst their tunes. For arguably doubling rock's vocabulary, they have been dubbed the Fathers of Thesaurus Rock.

Not surprisingly, though both Gurewitz and Graffin are hesitant to admit it, they were atypical adolescents. Pick up either of their first two releases and you'll ask yourself, "What the hell were these fifteen-year-olds reading?" Just check out the lyrics to "We're All Gonna Die" from *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*: "Early man walked away as modern man took control/Their minds weren't quite the same, to conquer was his goal/So he built his great empire and slaughtered his own kind/Then he died a confused man, killed himself with his own mind."

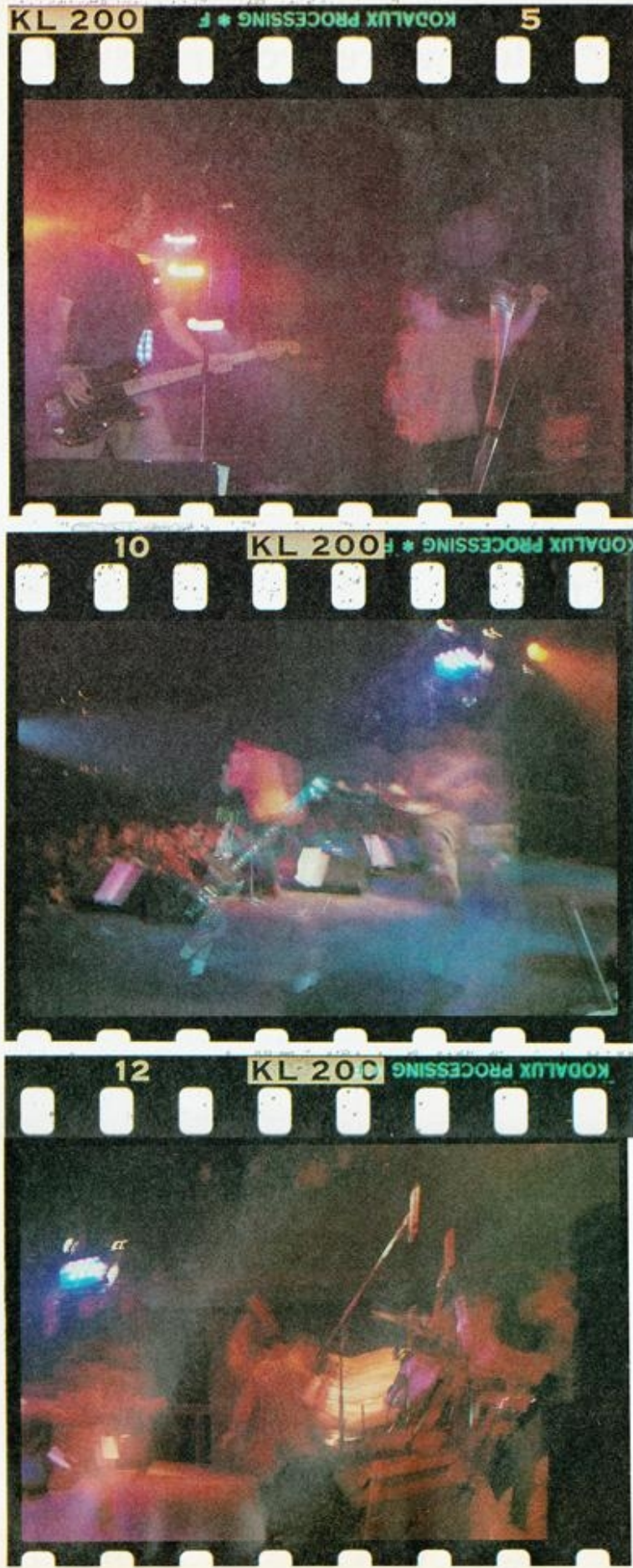
"That was about the time I read Sartre and started experimenting with existentialism," Graffin says. "I soon lost interest because I thought the whole thing was pretty ridiculous but I still think there were some cool ideas there. I was also reading a lot of popular science literature and got deeper and deeper into studying evolution. Richard Leaky's books at that age are perfect, the whole concept of extinction is very romantic."

Gurewitz was also no slacker when it came to mental improvement, and when I ask him the same question during a phone interview from Epitaph, he replies, "I was reading what was typical for a teenager with a yearning and a searching personality—all the great philosophers, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, Lao-tzu. Also at that point in my life I was heavily influenced by Kurt Vonnegut."

Both Graffin and Gurewitz ignored the pressures of hardcore's misguided anti-elitist orthodoxy, where reasonably well-educated people wrote lyrics that read like the ravings of simpletons. The very idea behind the band, implicit in their name, was to oppose dogma of any kind and demand that people think for themselves. This nonconformism naturally extended beyond their lyrics to the musical form of the songs themselves, which integrated a sense of harmony into hardcore's ritual pounding. Never constrained by punk's exclusively hard-edged prejudices, they brought a pop sensibility into their music. Gurewitz points to the odd combination of Darby Crash and Elton John's lyricist Bernie Taupin as major influences. With a passing reference to his childhood passion for Todd Rundgren, Graffin adds, "In retrospect, I can say that I was pretty influenced by folk music. My mom's side of the family is from rural Indiana where music is a big part of life. Those songs talked about relevant issues and there is simple basic accompaniment and simple harmonies and usually a good driving beat."

Bad Religion's unique sonic formula first went over the airwaves in 1980, when Circle Jerks founder Greg Hetson premiered the band's demos as a guest on "Rodney on the ROQ," the most influential punk show on L.A. radio at the time. In keeping with the do-it-yourself spirit that remains one of hardcore's most lasting legacies, Gurewitz borrowed a thousand bucks from his father to press Bad Religion's first EP on their own label. The record sold out its 1500 copies quickly, and has since become a valuable collectors item. A full-length album, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, followed in 1982, and the band was amazed that within a year, it had sold over 10,000 copies, almost a gold record by the limited punk standards of the day.

Bad Religion's refusal to fit into any neat mold led to an almost fatal turn in their history, the aptly titled album, *Into the Unknown*. It all began when Gurewitz purchased a Roland Juno 6 synthesizer for the band in the hope that Graffin would use it to



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write arrangements. Graffin unexpectedly started writing entire songs for the synth, completely changing the band's sound. Bentley quit before they had finished recording the first song. The rest of the band soon evaporated after its release.

Graffin attributes this initial disillusion of the band to more than musical differences. “It wasn't as simple as that,” he explains. “People were starting to go in different directions. We were seventeen and eighteen years old, and that's a time in one's life when you have to start making some decisions. For me it was easy, I was just going to go to college and do Bad Religion part time. You have to understand that the Bad Religion catalogue demarcates a history that is unique, because we started when we were fifteen years old and each record is a slice of time in our growing up. People always talk about how a band matures, but here we are talking about individuals maturing as well.”

So Graffin went to the University of Wisconsin, Gurewitz started a career as a sound engineer, then-drummer Peter Finestone went to England for a while, and Bentley proceeded to live a life of rock-and-roll dissipation as a member of Wasted Youth and T.S.O.L. A year later, Graffin was back in L.A. after the University kicked him out once the administration discovered he wasn't a legal resident of Wisconsin. After registering at UCLA, he reformed a truncated version of Bad Religion.

For the next year, the band included a high school friend on bass, Circle Jerks guitarist Greg Hetson, and Finestone. They did

shows on weekends, performing songs from the first EP and album. They recorded the *Back to the Known* EP, not their best work, but one that reminded their fans that they were still around. This low point in the band's history occurred when the initial creative surge of hardcore had definitely passed. Bands had broken up (Minor Threat) or evolved into other things (Black Flag), and there were the first ominous stirrings of the speed-metal/hardcore fusion in New York City hardcore.

In 1986, Bentley returned after playing a few shows with Bad Religion, remembering “how much fun it was to still play with these guys.” The following year Gurewitz rejoined the band, but after some initial resistance. “Brett was a completely changed man,” Graffin explains, “but he wanted to make Epitaph a real record label and thought, ‘What better way to do it than do another Bad Religion record?’ Up to then Brett was convinced that there wasn't a future for Bad Religion. We had to prove it to him by making him play a couple of shows. Once he rejoined, *Suffer* was written in five months.”

The band members agree that *Suffer*, and the two albums which followed, *No Control* and *Against the Grain*, comprise their most creative period to date. Gurewitz points to one of the reasons: “I had been listening to so many good and innovative groups coming through the recording studio, bands like Clawhammer and The Honorable Monster, and I had also worked on country records and funk records. Through constant exposure to

arrangements and different genres, I discovered what worked. I hadn't been writing songs for a few years, so there was a wellspring of musical ideas that had lain dormant, untapped, and ready to come out.”

Consequently, Bad Religion's songs were more structured and the addition of Hetson's second guitar gave the band added punch. Growing maturity also worked for a band so reliant on impudently smart lyrics. On *No Control* the title cut begins, “Culture was the seed of proliferation but it has gotten welded into an inharmonic whole,” and the entire album stands as Thesaurus Rock's towering achievement.

As before, Bad Religion's fortunes both creative and otherwise seemed tied to the overall state of punk rock. *Suffer* and Epitaph's rebirth appeared at the very beginning of punk's second wind, when the “indie revolution” was just gathering its forces. By the time *Against the Grain* was released in 1990, “alternative” was set to storm the mainstream. But it was Nirvana's “Teen Spirit” and not “Twenty-First Century (Digital Boy)” that led the charge. Bad Religion's album sold 70,000 copies in the first year, but that still wasn't enough for the boys to quit their day jobs. The lesson wasn't lost on them that you needed the support of major-label distribution to break into the mainstream.

And so they got on with their lives. While Gurewitz focused on expanding his label, Graffin started work on his Ph.D. in biology at Cornell University, doing research for a dissertation concerning the similarities between the bone tissue of

ancient vertebrates and that found in their modern descendents. The two albums from this period, *Generator* and *Recipe for Hate*, bear the marks of a band whose principal members are on separate coasts and involved in very different pursuits. The albums have high points, and Bobby Schayer taking over the drum stool in 1992 made for a more complex rhythmic approach, but otherwise the intense focus of the previous period seems to be missing. Referring to the haste with which these albums were recorded, Bentley says, “We would press the red button and if we didn't make a mistake we kept it.”

Though nobody in Bad Religion has said as much, it would have been foolish to expect that the band could continue to survive as a side project indefinitely, especially since key members were married and starting families. At the time, Epitaph, like most independent labels, didn't have the distribution that could really make the band a self-supporting entity. For example Graffin says, “Ithaca [where Cornell University is based] is a town where 40,000 students live. But the mall, where everyone shops, didn't stock our records.”

When asked whether in light of Epitaph's later breakthrough with the Offspring, such a thing might have been possible with Bad Religion, Gurewitz replies, “Yes, at the time I suspected it might be but I wasn't sure enough to sell my band on a dream and then let them down.” There is of course the argument that somehow making a living off one's music is “not punk rock,” but you will often find that those who make this argument are rarely musicians. As a

result, Bad Religion officially signed to Atlantic in 1993. The charge of "corporate sell-out" was as immediate as it was predictable.

Still, the band understands that punk's hostility towards "corporate rock" has a legitimate basis. "Back in the '80s," Greg Hetson notes, "a major label wouldn't even talk to a punk band much less sign them, so that gave fuel to the 'evil major labels' thing. But people who grew up with punk rock and independent music are now in responsible positions at a lot of the labels, and that's changed a lot of things."

A label owner himself, Gurewitz is in a unique position to judge the differences between independent and major labels. He still recommends that all young bands avail themselves of the creative freedom found on an indie label, while he defends Bad Religion's decision to sign with Atlantic. "I think music is art, and I think it's the artists who define themselves, not the company who puts them out. We had a body of work with seven full-length records; we'd made our mark. We'd defined ourselves artistically and professionally and at that point the change was not a big earthshaker. It's simply, 'Hey let's move to somebody who has broader distribution to see what happens at that level.'"

When Graffin discusses the whole "sell out" issue, his usual, measured scholarly tone betrays a hint of anger. He points to *Stranger Than Fiction* and says, "There is such a thing as selling out. For instance, if you compromise your art or you compromise your craft just for the sake of money, but that's not what Bad Religion ever did. All it takes is one listen to the new record; even though it's on a major label, it still has the same integrity and spirit as everything we have ever done."

Graffin visibly heats up on the subject when he discusses subsequent purist attacks on the band by *Maximum RockNRoll*, the Berkeley-based fanzine that sees itself as the PC keeper of the punk-rock flame. "To continue their religion or cult, they have to have this nebulous war

going on between 'Us' and 'Them,' and the 'Them' are these easy-to-conceive-of but difficult-to-finger enemies, like 'The Government' or 'Big Business.' Why do I say they are hard to finger? Because anyone who points to them as enemies, obviously has to rely on them to some degree.

"It's easy to understand why *Maximum RockNRoll* would erect an 'Us' and 'Them' scenario because they want to retain a readership. If

all of their readers start to realize that the issues aren't so simple, who is going to buy the magazine? In that respect it just looks like self-preservation. But my major problem with their perspective is that it opposes everything which Bad Religion has always stood for, and that is a spirit of independence, self-motivated thought, and the antithesis of dogma. For all those lowest common denominators out there, who unfortunately

you have to appeal to sometimes, I say to you, if you only like a band because of the label they're on, maybe you're a fool."

When it was announced that Gurewitz would not be touring with the band because of his "increased work load at Epitaph," according to a representative at Atlantic Records, rumors began to fly. The most repeated and most easily disproved one was that he opposed the move to

BAD RELIGION ON BAD RELIGION

BAD RELIGION EP

[Epitaph, 1980]

Brett: I like the record because it was raw, fresh and naive.

Greg: It established the core elements of the band.

HOW COULD HELL BE ANY WORSE?

[Epitaph, 1982]

Brett: That was a bunch of teenagers who pulled a rabbit out of a hat. We didn't know that we had made a great record.

We just did it. It was the blind leading the blind.

INTO THE UNKNOWN MINI-LP

[Epitaph, 1983]

Brett: A wart on the face of Bad Religion.

Jay: I walked out in the middle of recording this. I thought, "I don't want to be in the front of this. I don't want to be carrying the weed-eater on this one."

Greg: Don't mistake the marketing plan of Epitaph with the opinions of the rest of the band. Brett wanted to conceal that record and so does Jay but it's not as embarrassing as many would have you believe.

BACK TO THE KNOWN EP

[Epitaph, 1984]

Greg: I'd been back in for a year playing with Hetson, Finestone and Tim Galagos on bass and we just decided to put out an EP. It was an obvious title after the last one because we were playing a lot of the early punk clubs.

SUFFER

[Epitaph, 1988]

Jay: That was when everything clicked in with Bad Religion again. It was the band it was when we were playing in the garage at Greg Graffin's house.

Greg: In a hundred years if you look back at this era, at punk and grunge and all that, you would probably choose *Suffer* as a starting point. That record revitalized a lot of people's hopes in hardcore.

NO CONTROL

[Epitaph, 1989]

Brett: My favorite. The lyrics were good. The songs are good. I like the production, it was raw, I like the album cover. It's just a cool record.

Greg: The high point of thesaurus rock. Some people applaud that and I'm grateful for that, but other people are offended by it.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

[Epitaph, 1990]

Brett: The high points surpassed any other record but I don't think it was consistent. It would be my favorite record if it had three less songs.

Greg: That was our experimentation with being more populist in scope and to see if this hardcore music which we cultivated all these years had a shot at popularity.

GENERATOR

[Epitaph, 1992]

Brett: More experimental than our other records but far less consistent.

RECIPE FOR HATE

[Epitaph/Atlantic, 1993]

Greg: We were attempting to maintain the hardcore intensity and still make something that sounds new and modern.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

[Atlantic, 1994]

Greg: We definitely wanted to make sure that it retained a punk intensity because we knew that our fans were going to scrutinize this a lot more than others. We wanted to immediately squelch their fears that it was going to be a commercial sell-out.

Greg Hetson: What band isn't going to tell you that their most recent release isn't their best?

Note: Bad Religion's first EP, How Could Hell Be Any Worse?, and Back to the Known were re-released on one CD entitled Bad Religion 80-85, also on Epitaph.



"To continue [MRR's] religion or cult, they have to have this nebulous war

going on between 'Us' and 'Them,' and the 'Them' are these easy-to-conceive-of but difficult-to-finger enemies, like 'The Government' or 'Big Business.' Why do I say they are hard to finger? Because anyone who points to them as enemies, obviously has to rely on them to some degree."

Atlantic. When it was clear that he had formally quit the band, the remaining members maintained that Gurewitz had been unhappy with touring for several years because of his responsibilities at Epitaph. Gurewitz says on the contrary, "I always enjoyed myself on the road. I am a complicated individual and even though I enjoy doing business at Epitaph, I am also a creative person, and Epitaph doesn't always allow me enough time for composing, writing and reading. When I am on the road I can do those things. Most of my lyrics for *Stranger Than Fiction* were written while touring."

Gurewitz's own reasons for his departure are actually more mundane than the rumors. "In the last couple of years," he explains, "I had grown apart from several members of the band." His relationship with Bentley, who worked for him at Epitaph, was complicated by the boss-employee dynamic. "The relationship was stressful, and as a president of a record company, I now know that it's not the greatest idea to hire your friends." The departure was far from easy for Gurewitz, and he readily admits, "*Stranger Than Fiction* is lyrically the best album I have ever written. I am truly happy with all my lyrics and I look back on them and I can't believe that I wrote them." He agrees that his leaving has a sort of tragic quality. "But then I'm a romantic," he confesses, "and the more tragic the better." The split, however, seems less acrimonious than most, and he plans to continue to contribute songs to the band.

Gurewitz's replacement is Brian Baker, who started his career in Minor Threat and continued it in such outfits as Government Issue, the Meatmen and Dag Nasty. Long-time fans have marveled at the way his fresh perspective has seemed to further electrify a live show which was in no immediate danger of being called stale. The band members admit that they are having more fun than they have had in years. Baker gave up an opportunity to tour with R.E.M. to be in Bad Religion, so one would expect that

he would be reasonably immune to the sell-out charges. No such luck. His involvement in a heavy-metal combo, Junkyard, who signed to Geffen in the late '80s, has compelled some to label him "punk rock's first sell-out."

When asked about it, Baker sighs and tries to give you a sense of what it's like to play in a punk-rock band and then be offered a paying job doing something you love. "Dag Nasty had finished their third album for a very bad independent label, one that had not followed through on 90 percent of their commitments. I'm in L.A., our singer is in D.C., our bass player has quit, the drummer is living on the floor of my apartment, and then I run into Chris Gates, who used to play in the Big Boys, who says, 'Hey, we need a guitar player. The band's name is Junkyard. We sound like Motorhead and AC/DC and we're on Geffen,' and I think, 'Wow! What a great idea.' I had a great time for two years and then the label realized we weren't going to be the next Guns N' Roses and then dropped us." Before joining Bad Religion, Baker was working at a recording studio making \$6.50 an hour. Now he wonders what he has to apologize for.

The oversimplification of the phrase "sell out" becomes apparent the minute you start interacting with the punk audience circa 1994. In Leipzig, punk may retain its primal anger, but as the tour moves to the affluent west of Germany, the well-

scrubbed audiences mirror their alternative-slacker cousins in America. After each show, the band reenacts a ritual of hanging out and talking to the kids, keeping in line with their philosophy that punk rock is about sharing information. And every night the kids line up for autographs like they were waiting for Aerosmith. On a regular basis, the otherwise self-effacing Bobby Schayer takes hungry, broke kids out to the local McDonald's afterwards. Often, it's not until the middle of the meal that the fans realize that he's in the band. It's apparent that they're fans in the classic sense of the word, because although they may know all the words to the songs, they're still locked into the conventions of how a "rock star" should behave.

Graffin feels that this might change as more of the band's audience begins to understand Bad Religion's message of self-reliance and clear thinking. But in the meantime he has no problem with his music breaking into the mainstream. He says, "Punk rock isn't as stigmatized anymore, which means that people can listen to it and enjoy it without thinking that they are listening to something evil. Now people are realizing that it is a valid form of music and that it can be as popular as any other form of music. After all, we always used to say when we were sitting around in 1980, 'Wouldn't it be great if they played good music on the radio?'" ■

