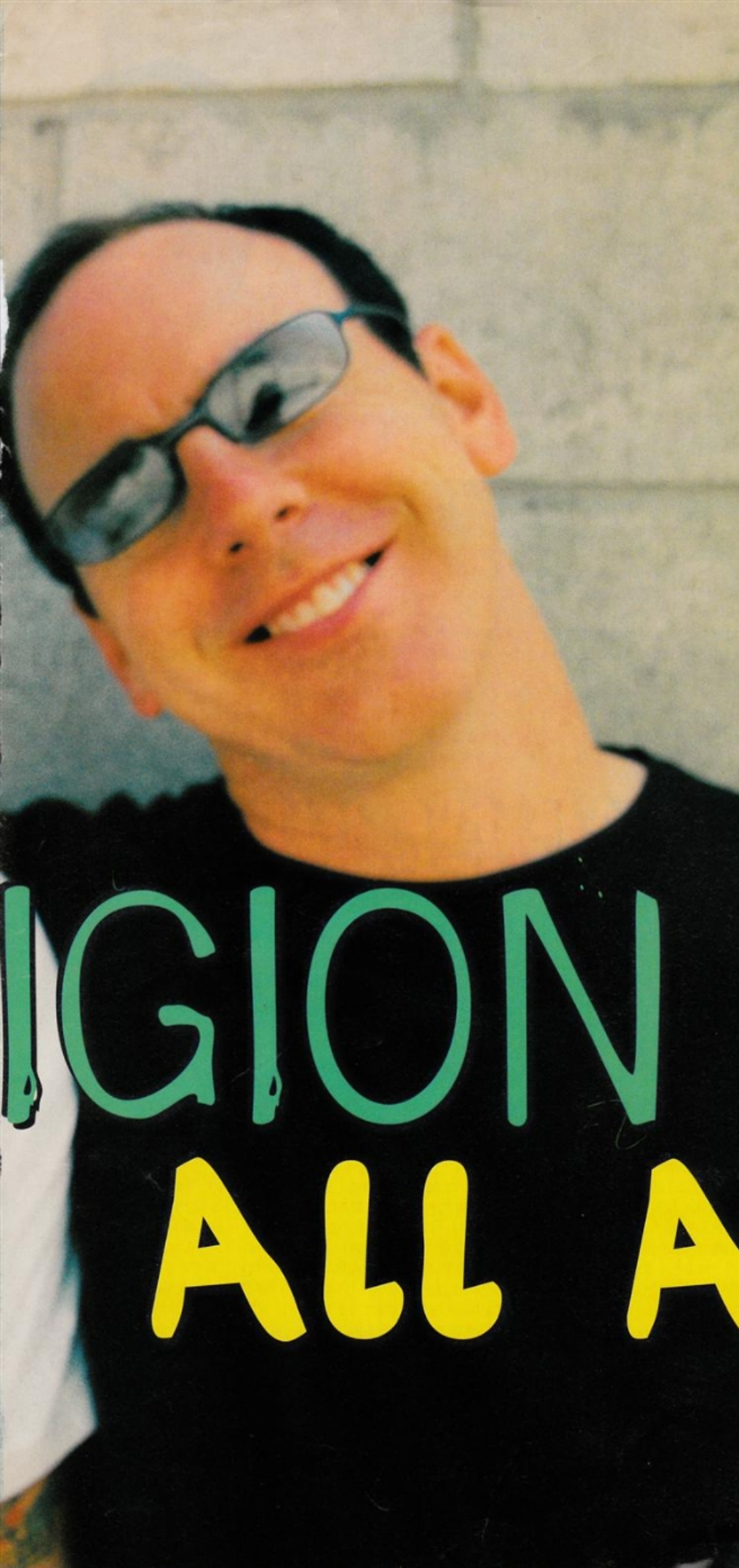


Words: Virginia Black / Photos: Marco Dos Santos

BAD REL



Seven years ago, Brett Gurewitz left Bad Religion to concentrate on Epitaph, and descended for a while into a personal hell. He's now rejuvenated and rejoined his former comrades. rock sound gets the lowdown from Mr Brett and Greg Graffin.

It's one of those moments when your heart skips a beat. Brett Gurewitz, Bad Religion guitarist and head honcho of Epitaph, is narrowing his eyes at me and demanding in measured tones, laced with underlying menace, "what (pause for emphasis) are you trying to say?"

Next to him on the hotel room couch, singer Greg Graffin is fixing me with an equally disorienting stare. "What (pause) are you suggesting?"

There's an eerie silence for several beats, as the blood rushes into my ears. Then Brett and Greg both roar with laughter. Damn, they got me again.

Watching Brett Gurewitz and Greg Graffin together is something like being in the presence of multiple-personality non-identical twins who share a secret language. There's the pair of deadpan stand-up comedians who just happen to be funnier than any you've witnessed before. Then the two highly intelligent, lucid political commentators (you can see how Noam Chomsky's speeches became Epitaph releases). And, of course, a duo of great punk rock musicians who've been involved in the genre for over 20 years, and who still care just as passionately today.

The reason we're here today is 'The Process Of Belief', the album which marks Brett's return to Bad Religion after many years away. Having co-founded the band

REGION ALL AGES

with Greg and bassist Jay Bentley (BR is completed by guitarists Greg Hetson and Brian Baker, and new drummer Brooks Wackerman), Brett had started Epitaph for the usual reason - the band wanted to release records, and at the time no one else looked likely to do it for them. The label had meandered along happily for years, growing gradually as Bad Religion

gained popularity (to the extent where BR themselves moved to the majors), and signing other small punk bands to give them an outlet for their own music. Until the inconceivable happened in the mid-'90s: punk moved seemingly overnight from being an underground niche to mass market popularity, and a little Epitaph band called The Offspring, and their album 'Smash', were suddenly very big news indeed. Brett left his band to concentrate on the label, but far from turning into a happily-megabucks Donald Trump of punk, he found the entire process disorientating and disturbing. As Epitaph exploded, Brett himself very nearly imploded.

"I think at least outwardly I handled it admirably. I didn't sell my company, I didn't wind up selling anything – even though there were rumours about once a week that I had sold the company, I still own my company. I don't think anyone does a better job with punk rock than Epitaph.

"It happened overnight, virtually, it happened over the course of three or four months. And then after 'Smash', '...And Out Come The Wolves' (Rancid, Epitaph) and after that 'Stranger Than Fiction' (Bad Religion, Atlantic) and it seemed like I had some kind of a Midas touch, and that certainly had not been the case up until then in my life, so I really didn't know what was happening."

Although outwardly Brett might have been handling things, inwardly he was starting to crumble, as he sought refuge in heroin. He'd left Bad Religion to concentrate on the label, and from being a prolific songwriter, his personal output as a musician for the second half of the '90s was limited to two tracks with a project called The Daredevils.

"I had plans to write and record a whole album worth of Daredevils material which would basically have



used to really get to me, and around the time of '94-'95 it was a big deal, I was really taking it to heart, because I got a lot of unfair criticism, people blaming me for ruining punk rock and for destroying the scene, and for selling out the whole culture – it's like, to bestow that much power on an individual is absurd, I don't have the ability to make 'Smash' sell nine million copies, you know? It's something that happened, like a force of nature.

"But one thing that hasn't diminished is how much I love music. Maybe it was more of a fresh discovery when I was a kid, but I still get gooseflesh from a good song." The heroin led, briefly, to jail. It must have been hell.

him, which would have made him feel pressured. I mean band relations at the time of the split back in '95 were a little more strained than they had been up until then. Now there's a renewed camaraderie, a renewed closeness.

"When we started this album, we were really determined to write a modern classic, if you want. And we knew that that was going to be a struggle, so for the first few songs we were crossing our fingers, but very quickly we realised when we heard them that this was going to be great, and it came very naturally, it wasn't forced at all."

The track 'Sorrow' has inadvertently become some-

"I feel we've made the definitive Bad Religion record" Brett

been my solo project, but, ah – during that period of time I was caught up in a downward spiral of drug addiction and I didn't get around to finishing my writing."

Was the heroin a kind of response to the fact that Epitaph was suddenly getting huge?

"Totally, that was a big part of it. Although I don't think it's a good idea to make excuses for my drug use, it affected me very powerfully, and for a long time it was very, very difficult for me to come to terms with my own success – and I still struggle with it to this day, but I think I'm better at it now."

Was it a self-esteem issue, a feeling that you didn't deserve to have good things happen to you?

"Absolutely, and coupled with my roots in punk rock – lashing out at authority and wealth, and then all of a sudden finding myself in that position was quite a shock, and it was sudden, and unexpected, and I wasn't prepared for it."

Others in the underground scene started to lash out. DIY bible Maximum Rock'n'Roll did a volte-face: having originally hailed 'Smash' with a good review, it seemed that now Brett, Epitaph and The Offspring had become a kind of multi-headed Great Satan of Capitalism, and many rushed to join in the chorus of disapproval. Does that kind of thing still hurt him now?

"I've learned just not to pay too much attention to it, and it doesn't phase me as much as it used to, but it

"Oh yes, it was. But I think that in the end that's what saved my life – I overdosed, then was arrested, and that forced me to get serious about getting clean. So it worked out well in the end."

Sobriety certainly suits him, and his return to Bad Religion – and the band's return to Epitaph – just completes the picture.

BACK TO THE KNOWN

So Greg, how does it feel having him back?

"It's the most important thing that could have happened to Bad Religion. We didn't realise what a struggle it was without him until he came back. The things that I suffered most were feeling like I was writing in a creative vacuum, I didn't have my creative partner there with me. When you go through hard times, sometimes you don't recognise how hard it is until it gets easier." Was there actually a real rift between you while he was away?

Greg pauses. He leans forward, and asks, "do you mind if we do this in private?" Another pause. Laughter erupts again from both of them. Damn.

"No, unlike Brett and some of the other members, Brett and I stayed in contact through the whole time. The rift was only in that I didn't want to talk about music with him, because I didn't want to put pressure on him or I didn't want him to think that I couldn't carry on without

thing of a post-September 11 anthem, although it was written before that date. Do they feel that their music is even more relevant in today's climate?

"The first thing that struck me after 9/11," says Greg, "was that this was caused by religious fanaticism, something we've always been rallying against, and in a sense – yeah, I think today I'm as proud as ever to be in a band called Bad Religion."

What are the main themes of the new album?

"Let me think about that," ponders Brett. "There's humanism, certainly, environmentalism, personal struggle, and hope."

"I concur entirely," adds Greg. "I might add naturalism, and optimism – which is hope."

Greg himself is involved in ecology and is still working on his doctorate, which will deal with the conflict of evolution and theology, something that is particularly highlighted in the States today, where many teachers are scared of teaching evolution "because it's too controversial", and leave it out of the biology curriculum altogether. Forget Darwin, let's head back to the Book of Genesis.

But for now, both men are concentrating on 'The Process Of Belief', both justifiably proud of their work. Brett sums it up. "The thing I'm most proud of is that I feel we've made the definitive Bad Religion record. If I had a choice to say to somebody 'here's my band', and only play them one record, I think I would play them this." **rs**