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bad religion

evolution as a

Forget all those stories about what's supposedly killing punk: the massive airplay, the indiscriminate fans, the tiresome rants in *Maximum Rock 'N' Roll*. On a cold January evening in midtown Manhattan, 11 floors above Sixth Avenue in one of those stale hotels that still pass for class in this aging city, what's killing punk might just be... the pizza.

"See, I told you Stage Deli sandwich, but you had to have the 'za!" Bad Religion bassist Jay Bentley chides guitarist Greg Hetson, who is glancing at a depressingly greasy pizza box that once housed a supper he may live to regret. "I hate the 'za!" Hetson yells back, as much to himself as to Bentley, as if he wasn't thinking straight when the box came around. Bentley, having eaten his sandwich, seems more at ease.

Actually, the whole place feels like kindergarten after snack time. Bentley, Hetson, drummer Bobby Schayer and guitarist Brian Baker sit in comfortable chairs around the room, but with a restless energy that could come from cabin fever, newly consumed calories, or both: They squirm in their seats, taking turns hopping in and out of their chairs for a Coke, a telephone break, an excuse to step out on the terrace. The members of Bad Religion are promoting their ninth album and their second for a major label, *The Gray Race*. Getting them to talk seriously about the album or anything is, at first, a challenge. Bentley jokes that they're all New Yorkers and that this musty hotel room is their home: "No fireplace—but it feels comfortable, right?"

To be fair, these guys may as well call this home—their rock 'n' roll family has survived 15 years of challenges, bigger than bad dinners and humdrum hotels. Punk was always supposed to be about destruction, about tearing down walls, physical and philosophical, about taking tradition out with the wash; but Bad Religion has been about creating, building, establishing. Launched in 1980, when the band members were about 15, Bad Religion rose up from Southern California's thriving hardcore scene with less fanfare than many of its more illustrious peers (Black Flag, Circle Jerks) but with a strange will to survive, even through a four-year hiatus in the mid-'80s that served as a temporary *de facto* breakup.

Now in their early 30s, these guys are riding a string of revered punk albums with a solid rhythmic attack and an attention to sonic detail, from 1982's exuberant *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?* to late-'80s classics *Suffer*, *No Control* and *Against The Grain*, standards against which many a young punk band are measured. The rock lifestyle, however modestly they've experienced it, is one they take in stride. "I'm in a band because that's what I know how to do," says Bentley offhandedly. "When I was 15, someone asked me to play a bass. I said, 'What's a bass?' 'It's the guitar-like thing with only four strings.' 'Oh, okay.' I mean, why not?"

Still, there's a key family member missing. That would be lead singer and songwriter Greg Graffin, clean-cut and dressed in a logo-free T-shirt and jeans. His lanky frame drifts in and out of the room, avoiding the pizza, making phone calls, and discussing plans with a frazzled publicist to fly home to his wife and two kids in Ithaca, New York after this junket.

Graffin is not only the band's leader; he is their psychic center and a chief source of their sound. The melodies he sings, which he says derive from the folk music he listened to as a kid, define Bad Religion not just as thrash-masters but as genuine songsmiths. And his wordy, challenging lyrics, with more syllables per verse than anything this side of Paul Simon, got Bad Religion dubbed as leaders of a new school of "thesaurus rock." When he finally joins his bandmates on the couch, the mood in the room changes palpably—kindergarten settles down just a bit.

by Chris Molanphy

survival strategy



L-R: Bentley, Heston, Schayer, Baker, Gaffin

Drummer Schayer, who joined five years ago, is a sort of semi-veteran of the band. Brian Baker, formerly of hardcore greats Minor Threat and Dag Nasty, joined the band on tour in 1994 to replace founding guitarist Brett Gurewitz. *The Gray Race*, produced by former Car Ric Ocasek of all people, is Baker's first album as a full member.

The three Bad Religion members who date back to the beginning, Graffin, Bentley and (just a bit later) Hetson, remember their early days as being marked by a camaraderie among the bands of the SoCal scene—and, unfortunately, a pecking order. "We were sort of on this second tier of bands," says Graffin. "Greg [Heston] here was two-timing us in the Circle Jerks, and they had access to stuff we didn't have."

Heston smiles sheepishly. "Hey, I got you guys the use of the Circle Jerks' van," he recalls. "You used me for that."

The main thing other bands had that Bad Religion needed was a record deal. The band started its own label, Epitaph, at first just as a conduit for its own albums. From the beginning, though, Gurewitz took a passionate interest in the indie-rock biz, and by the late 1980s, he started signing other bands (NOFX, Pennywise, Rancid) and devoted more of his time to turning Epitaph into an indie heavyweight.

That finally paid off in 1994, when Epitaph sold five million albums by a little band called Offspring. "Mr. Brett" announced his departure from Bad Religion after the band recorded *Stranger Than Fiction*—its first major-label release. At the time, band members spoke in the press about a separation that was inevitable and seemingly amicable. But it's a subject that seems to bring out conflicting emotions.

"I was in L.A., and I actually bumped into him at this taco stand," Bentley says. "It was fine—you know, 'Hey, what's up.' But for whatever reason, I really don't see him much any more."

Neither does Graffin, but he isn't around to hear Bentley's story or to give his own unhappy spin on Gurewitz's departure. Luckily, he is willing to take the time for a one-on-one chat after making that trip home to Ithaca.

A week later, Graffin is enjoying a well-earned day off (from everything except a chat with an eager journalist) in his home studio, which is his private retreat. He lives in Ithaca in large part because he's getting his degree there—a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology at Cornell. Over the years, Graffin's studies have had an impact on his lyrics and uneasy worldview. *The Gray Race* finds him more wary than ever, giving voice not only to the restless adolescent ("Empty Causes," "Nobody Listens") but also the cynical adult concerned about scary global trends ("Ten In 2010," about the possibility that the population might double in 15 years) and the increasing emphasis on hate in social discourse ("Them And Us").

Away from his bandmates and the promo whirlwind, Graffin explains how 15 years on the intellectual outskirts of punk has given him a unique perspective on music, social commentary, and how he makes his living.

I understand the Ph.D. is on hold.

Yeah, it's something I can always go back to. At this point of my life, the time I have to devote to research is cut way back.

Is the band a major contributing factor?

The band is one thing, but also my family—the kids are two and four years old, so that's getting to the point where it takes time out of the career.

What music do you play around the house for your kids?

Bad Religion, of course. I mean, my son is always playing around in my studio, and there's always Bad Religion demos playing. You know, I think there's something really innate about our music and their desire to slam—this fast, galloping rhythm just drives the kids to distraction.

Tell me about the title of the album. The Gray Race is the human race?

Yeah, exactly. We as humans are given this compassion that allows us to see shades of gray. Animals don't have that conceptual reference point—they know either to run away or to fight, that it's time to eat or to sleep. The metaphor that would describe them is black-and-white. But the ironic thing is that man has this evolutionary gift, this ability to see the grays, but the framework of the world is set up in black and white. For instance, when we think of the most successful people—I'm not applauding this—they're the ones who think in terms of profit and loss... the

shades of gray—political, social—are nonexistent. To get along in society, compassion has to fall by the wayside, and that, I think, is man's big dilemma.

How does your music play into that? Does it exorcise fears?

I'm not afraid a lot, just disappointed. I guess the more I experience, the more I take comfort in knowing that everyone follows these same trends in life. You know, birth, maturity, some sort of mid-life crisis—well, before that, I guess you try to find something to do, a career...

Where are you in this whole cycle? I mean, you started the band so young, so you've just turned 30 recently...

Yeah, I'm 31 now. I guess I'm going through a sort of early mid-life crisis [laughs]. Which is kind of good, 'cause I'm getting it over with now.

What do you think the new generation of kids listening to punk is seeking?

Well, they're kids, and they wanna be rocked. Hopefully, they also want to see and hear something thought-provoking, something more meaningful than just the T-shirt expression.

Having Brian as a full band-member—how has that changed the dynamics?

You know, it didn't change the dynamics as much as Brett leaving did. To understand the dynamics, you have to understand what it was like before, with two songwriters in the band, but with different missions. Brett was more up on the marketing side of things, and that's what his strong point was... his great vision was marketing, and building Epitaph and making it an empire. My vision was furthering the idea of the band, of sharing and interacting with people, and that caused a lot of friction. And so, when he left and Brian came in, Brian wasn't really concerned about preserving this long-term image of Bad Religion. He has an image of his own. So we just focused on the album. That allowed me the freedom to accomplish my ideas, because that pressure was off.

What's your relationship with Brett now?

Well, I live 3,000 miles from the guy; when I'm in L.A, I might see him, but it's been a while since we've seen or talked with each other.

You said previously that he might contribute in some small way to the band.

That was what I thought at the time, but that hasn't proven to be the case.

Now that the band members live all over the country, the times you do see each other, is the relationship still going strong?

Actually, yeah, it's a lot better now—as I was saying, with that pressure gone, everybody knows what their role is, and that's so important.

Everybody agrees that you've been very influential on the current wave of punk bands. What's it like to hear your sound in other bands' music?

[laughs] I think I have to fight myself to acknowledge it. I'm always very populist in my philosophy, that music is for everybody—when I give something, I don't peg it as Bad Religion property. But then when other people tell me... then I start to concede the point: "Yeah, okay, I can hear our sound in that."

You've outlasted most of your contemporaries. How long do you think Bad Religion will go on?

Oh, man, that's like me asking you how long you're going to write. Probably the rest of your life. So, you know, I hope that we'll always be around. **END**

DISCOGRAPHY

How Could Hell Be Any Worse? (Epitaph) 1982

Into The Unknown (Epitaph) 1983

Back To The Known (EP) (Epitaph) 1984

Suffer (Epitaph) 1988

No Control (Epitaph) 1989

Against The Grain (Epitaph) 1990

Generator (Epitaph) 1992

Recipe For Hate (Epitaph) 1993

Stranger Than Fiction (Epitaph-Atlantic) 1994

All Ages (Epitaph) 1995

The Gray Race (Atlantic) 1996