

# MUSIC

## CONNECTION

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### BAD RELIGION

Why did these indie rebels finally sign with a major?

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# Bad Religion

By Pat Lewis



For thirteen years, Bad Religion traversed the peripheral of the mainstream music industry and proudly wore their shield of independence like one of the knights who graced Sir Arthur's roundtable. While thumbing their nose at authority (i.e. the major labels) with their "do it yourself" attitude, this post-punk/alternative band self-produced and self-released seven LPs and two EPs, which thus far have sold in excess of half a million units collectively. Guitarist/songwriter Brett Gurewitz even spearheaded his own indie label, Epitaph Records, which today is one of the most well-respected, top-grossing and completely independent record companies in the country. Not only does the label boast the lucrative Bad Religion catalog, but Epitaph's current roster includes Down By Law, Claw Hammer, Insted, Rancid, Pennywise and NOFX, among others.

Manager-less, and with virtually no mainstream radio airplay to speak of, Bad Religion built the second largest underground fan base—rivaled only by Washington, DC's Fugazi—and has toured around the country (as well as Europe) by their own means more times than they probably care to remember.

For all intents and purposes, Bad Religion was the epitome of the independent ethos. But recently, the band signed a multi-record deal with Atlantic Records, and in doing so, ended their reign as L.A.'s Kings of Independence.

Such an offense will undoubtedly be met with cries of "off with his head" from devout independent music defenders, convinced the band has sold-out. But apparently, the possibility of this didn't sway the band from making their decision. Neither did the fact that the band recently released their most successful album to date, *Recipe For Hate*, which has sold over 180,000 units and spent ten weeks on *Billboard's* "Heatseekers" chart. In addition, their first single, "American Jesus" (which features backing vocals by Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder), has been in regular rotation on MTV's *120 Minutes* alternative rock program for the last month.

So why did Bad Religion sign with a major label at the height of the band's indie career? "I think you have to show progress," answers vocalist Greg Graffin, who resides in New York and is presently working on his Ph.D. in Zoology. "And this was a natural way to progress. We're as big as any independent band in the country. Now let's see if we can become as big as any band in the world. We certainly couldn't do that on an indie label."

The point that Graffin makes—about not being able to become a "big band" on an indie label—is an interesting one, and an accurate one as well. Certainly, urban music has enjoyed gold and platinum success at the indie level. However, there haven't been a lot of gold records earned by indie bands, who fall in the alternative

music genre.

Instead, most indie alternative bands have had to somehow first catapult themselves onto a major label before they can begin to reap the benefits of mainstream acceptance. Nirvana, Sonic Youth, Nine Inch Nails, Urge Overkill, Smashing Pumpkins, and Jane's Addiction are just a few successful ex-indie bands. And then of course, there are other alternative bands who have entirely bypassed the indie stage and debuted on major labels, including Stone Temple Pilots, Blind Melon, Ministry and Pearl Jam, among others. There is little question that alternative music is making a substantial impact on the music industry and riding high on the *Billboard* charts, so what better time to be in the thick of things, so to speak?

"In the current musical climate, you have to ask yourself, why isn't Bad Religion selling a half a million records, when you've got bands like Nirvana and Stone Temple Pilots who are platinum or multi-platinum," stresses the singer. "Now is that because they're a much better band than us? Maybe it is. But, if that's not the reason, then we have to say, 'Why not?' Maybe it's the distribution. Maybe it's the marketing. Maybe it's the publicity. I mean, I'm not an expert on the record industry, but it seems that the major labels' forte is getting things everywhere. So we just thought, let's try a major label and see what happens."

Bad Religion's Atlantic recording contract includes the re-release of their current LP, *Recipe For Hate*, as well as the firm commitment from Atlantic to release one additional album of new material and the option for three more albums after that. But, while the band is reluctant to give the exact dollars and cents figure of the deal, bass player Jay Bentley does offer this: "The deal that we struck with Atlantic was exactly what we had with Epitaph. What we said was, 'Here's what we make per record, whether it be in a year or an album cycle or whatever it takes. This is how much we've made so far off of each album. Give us that, and at least we won't take a nose dive here.'"

Unlike most indie bands who move onto majors and then release a new album a year or so later, Atlantic opted to re-release *Recipe For Hate*. "They'll just continue what Epitaph has been doing with co-op adds, posters, etc., except where it says Epitaph, it will say Atlantic," explains Bentley.

But why re-release the album in the first place? "On Epitaph, the main sales of a particular record happen within the first three to six months of release," answers Bentley. "And after that, it's just a fairly steady catalog flow. The Atlantic people were excited about *Recipe* in particular, and they felt they could do something more with it. It gives the record a second life."

While there wasn't an industry bidding war over Bad Religion, a few major labels did show some interest in the band during the last several years. But it was Atlantic's



Greg Graffin

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Brett Gurewitz

Senior Vice President, Danny Goldberg, who actually won the guys’ confidence. “We’d been approached by a lot of other labels,” says Bentley, “but we didn’t really appreciate their attitude. It just seemed like they put on a different face to come and talk to us. It wasn’t real. It was big business. And we didn’t want to get caught up in that. Every meeting that we had, we’d laugh, we’d eat and we’d say good-bye. But when we met with Danny, the first thing he said was, ‘I don’t want to embarrass you guys.’ Which was amazing, coming from somebody who doesn’t have to care.”

“Because of Danny Goldberg’s enthusiasm,” concurs Graffin, “we all thought that we should give Atlantic a shot.”

Of course, enthusiasm and even cold, hard cash is no guarantee that Bad Religion will succeed any further on Atlantic than they would’ve on their own. “Maybe Atlantic’s ploy could be to squash Bad Religion into oblivion so that the Melvins will become the biggest hard-core band in the world,” jests Bentley.

“I’m a bit trepid,” he adds, “because it’s a serious move. But I’m also excited.”

“All we want to see is if Bad Religion is reaching its full potential,” says Graffin. “And if we can do it, great. But if we can’t do it, then doesn’t that tell us something about Epitaph and that indeed that’s the place that we should stay?”

Bad Religion’s decision to put all of their eggs into Atlantic’s basket was not made solely by one particular member or the leader of the band. First off, there is no leader of the band. Instead, the band—which, in addition to Gurewitz, Graffin and Bentley, includes guitarist Greg Hetson and drummer Bobby Schayer—made the decision jointly. “We were all on the phone together,” recalls Bentley, “and we said, ‘Do you want to do it?’ Everybody was just silent for a while and finally everybody said, ‘Yeah, I guess so.’ There wasn’t any champagne popping or heavy-duty dancing going on.”

But, while their decision seems like a well-timed and natural progression for the band as a whole, it must’ve been a much tougher decision for guitarist Gurewitz. After all, his “yeah, I guess so” meant he would literally lose the biggest, and certainly, the most profitable, band on his fledgling label.

“I’ve always told Bad Religion that Bad Religion’s desires will always come before Epitaph’s, and in that way, avoid conflict

between the band and the company,” confesses the entrepreneur. “So, when it came time to decide whether or not to go to a major label, I told them, I’m not really qualified to be a part of this decision because I own Epitaph. But I want to make it clear that Epitaph is still an independent with no outside affiliations, whatsoever. Epitaph is the same as ever. We just lost one of our artists.”

And considering Epitaph has sold 1.4 million records since its inception in late 1988, it comes as no surprise that Gurewitz has no plans to close-up shop! “NOFX’s third album came out about six months ago,” says Gurewitz, “and it’s already sold over 50,000 copies. Which, for a label my size, is pretty impressive. Penny-wise, which is probably my most promising new group, just shipped about two or three weeks ago, and it’s up to 35,000 records already. And these are the kinds of numbers all of my acts are doing. I’m not trying to tell you that Epitaph is some kind of a miracle marketing machine, but we are putting out really good records. And even though the mainstream press hasn’t caught on, kids out there are just grooving on it!”

Epitaph has also acquired that ever important indie hipness factor, which certainly doesn’t hurt sales or the quality of the bands that the label is able to attract. “There’s no question that to some extent, Epitaph is hip,” admits Gurewitz, “because it’s the same way that Fidel Castro is hip. He’s like the only one in Latin America who never kowtowed to the west. So he’s kinda

a hero for that. And any label that maintains its independence, has that kinda stigma, which is positive.”

Bad Religion was conceived during the tumultuous Eighties punk scene in Los Angeles. At that time, the members were a bunch of snotty-nosed, angry teenagers from the San Fernando Valley. But now, thirteen years later, most of the guys are married-with-children. And it hardly seems like they’d be angry anymore. “Anger is outward dissatisfaction,” explains Graffin. “People who are angry are carrying around a burden of emotions. And when you’re a teenager, you fit into that category. But once you get a little older and you see the world a little bit, you realize that you don’t have that bad of a rap. But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t things that are angering and that are inexcusable about the world that we live in. And those are the things that we tend to write about. Anger from a teenager is ‘fuck you, let me do what I want.’ Anger from an adult is somewhat more subtle than that, even though the basic theme is still the same.”

It still remains to be seen whether Bad Religion’s jump into the major leagues will be met with any more mainstream acceptance than prior to the deal. But either way, this is a band that’s in it for all the right reasons—the music—and that, above all, should keep them plugging angrily away for many more albums to come. And after all, you can take the band out of the indie, but you can’t take that indie spirit out of the band! **MC**

## DISCOGRAPHY

1. 1981, released EP, *Bad Religion*. (7" vinyl, 33 1/3 r.p.m., containing six songs. Out-of-Print.) Sold 1,500 copies.
2. 1982, released LP, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?* Sold 20,000 copies.
3. 1984, released LP, *Into The Unknown*. Sold 10,000 copies.
4. 1986, released EP, *Back To The Known*. Sold 10,000 copies.
5. 1988, released LP, *Suffer*. Sold 110,000 copies.
6. 1989, released video, *Along The Way*. Sold 10,000. (Filmed in late '88- early '89 during the *Suffer* tour.)
7. 1989, released LP, *No Control*. Sold 110,000 copies.
8. 1990, released compilation/retrospective LP, *Bad Religion 80-88*, which includes *Back To The Known*, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?* Sold 80,000 copies.
9. 1991, released LP, *Against The Grain*. Sold 110,000 copies.
10. 1992, released LP, *Generator*. Sold 135,000 copies.
11. 1993, released LP, *Recipe*. Sold 180,000 copies.