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# STRANGER THAN FICTION

THE TRUE STORY OF BAD RELIGION'S PUNK CRUSADE

BY NEVIN MARTELL





PHANTASMAL MYRIADS OF SANE BUCOLIC BIRTH. INCHOATE BEATITUDE.  
THE QUINTESSENTIAL MINDLESS MODERN EPICENE. THE VECTOR OF  
SUFFRAGE. OPIATES OF SILICON. A MISANTHROPIC ANTHROPOID.

What the fuck are these guys talking about? For 30 years, Bad Religion has been challenging its audiences with highly intellectualized lyrics, even while pounding them with some of the most tightly coiled hardcore punk riffs ever written. It may be the only band to ever inspire someone in a mosh pit to ponder the Israel-Palestine conflict in one moment and the evolution of humanity in the next, but that's because Bad Religion aspires to be anything but typical. Lead singer Greg Graffin has cultivated a second career as a scholar and professor of science, while guitarist Brett Gurewitz has earned a name for himself as the founder of ANTI- and Epitaph Records, where he helped The Offspring and Rancid become international headliners and brought Tom Waits and Nick Cave to the hipster sect.

The unconventional story of Bad Religion begins back in 1979 at the San Fernando Valley's El Camino Real High School. Graffin and Gurewitz recruited their friends Jay Ziskrout and Jay Bentley to play drums and bass to create a band that for a fleeting moment may have been called Head Cheese, Smegma, or Vagina Discharge. "I'm pretty happy we ended up choosing Bad Religion," Graffin says now. "It's a lot easier to age gracefully talking about religion. You can't find many ways to gracefully discuss head cheese." The foursome's first show was playing a party in 1980 alongside another upstart band destined for bigger things, Social Distortion.

Within a year, Bad Religion released a self-titled six-song EP, which sported its now iconic Crossbuster symbol—a cross inside a red circle with a slash across it. Songs like "World War III" and "Slaves" were fast, furious and provocative, informed by the political activism of the Sex Pistols' John Lydon and The Germs' Darby Crash, as well as the rapid-fire hardcore style of punk standard bearers like Black Flag and Adolescents. Bad Religion expanded this formula on its 1982 debut, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, which saw the departure of Ziskrout halfway through the recording (he was replaced by Pete Finestone). To further mix things up, Graffin inexplicably decided to take the band in a prog-experimental direction for its sophomore set with the now out-of-print *Into the Unknown* (though the band hints that these songs may be

re-released at some point in the future). This unexpected swerve cost the band almost all its fans as well as Jay Bentley. Amidst the fallout, over the next five years Graffin went to college while Gurewitz worked on getting Epitaph

Records off the ground and developed "a pretty phenomenal drug habit." But in 1986, Gurewitz cleaned up, Bentley rejoined the band, and Greg Hetson of the Circle Jerks was added on second guitar. Bad Religion tore through a trio of albums in quick succession—*Suffer, No Control* and *Against the Grain*—and cemented its status as a punk pioneer.

This all set the stage for 1993's *Recipe for Hate*, which found the band experimenting with riffs that owed more to the grunge explosion and college radio than to traditional punk. Featuring guest appearances from Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and Johnette Napolitano of Concrete Blonde, songs like "Struck a Nerve" and "American Jesus" unexpectedly got Bad Religion its first mainstream airplay. The punk community gave the band mixed reviews for this new direction (especially since the band left Epitaph to sign with major label Atlantic Records), but it found wider critical acclaim than ever before. The next album, *Stranger Than Fiction*, was another success, though Gurewitz left the band in the midst of its recording. He and Graffin were butting heads constantly, Epitaph was taking off with The Offspring, and Gurewitz had slipped back into using drugs again. Graffin kept the band going for another three albums before he and Gurewitz reunited for the Epitaph-released *The Process of Belief*.

Three decades since its formation, Bad Religion is still challenging the establishment. The 2004 protest/concept album, *The Empire Strikes First*, was a balls-out, bombastic broadside to the Bush administration that made *American Idiot* sound like a Disney soundtrack, while *The Dissent of Man*, the band's 15<sup>th</sup> and newest studio set, is another battle cry against punk mediocrity and a sharp-tongued reminder to always think about the world around us: Don't take anything at face value. Question authority. Make your voice heard. It's the perfect summation of everything Bad Religion has stood tall for since first unleashing its eponymous manifesto: "Fight!/ Don't you know the place we're in is a piece of shit?/ Don't you know blind faith through lies won't conquer it?"

Here, FILTER sits with Brett Gurewitz and Greg Graffin to sort through 30 years of faith, lies and conquering.



BRETT GUREWITZ

**Thirty years ago, did you ever dream that you'd be talking about Bad Religion three decades later?**

**Greg Graffin:** No, because every year I've looked at it as a one-year deal. When you're doing art for a living, you can't get too wrapped up in it as a career. I've always thought music was a gift that could be taken away at any time.

**Brett Gurewitz:** No way, because there was no grand plan in the beginning. I don't think any of us realized what we were doing, or that it would have any lasting value.

**At what point did you realize that the band actually had staying power?**

**Gurewitz:** One day in 1987, Jay [Bentley] and I were driving home from Tijuana in my car and we were listening to a cassette of the final mixes of *Suffer*. We had a moment when I turned to him and said, "Holy shit, is it possible that this record is as good as I think it might be?"

**What do you remember from your first show?**

**Gurewitz:** I remember my friend Tom Clement said, "You guys are really good, just don't break up."

**Graffin:** I was nervous as hell. I wasn't able to focus on the audience at all because I was scared shitless. I thought they were going to hate me. All the classic insecurities of my teenage life were wrapped up in that performance. Ultimately, I considered it a success because we didn't get beaten up and nobody threw their shoes at us.

**Your Crossbuster symbol has become a punk icon. What does it mean to you now?**

**Graffin:** The cross represents doctrine, while the slash means you simply won't find it practiced here. It's a statement of confidence and self-assurance. We stand in opposition to the doctrines of Christianity, particularly the false statements about the way the world is and human nature. Having said that, people who do live their lives behind those doctrines are still just as welcome at our shows. Just because we stand in opposition to it doesn't mean we stand opposed to those people; people frequently get confused about that. They see our symbol

as a violent reaction against their religion, when it's simply a statement that we don't practice it.

**Gurewitz:** The Bad Religion symbol employs the cross simply because it's the most powerful logo. However, from everything I know about Christ, he was absolutely awesome. I've got nothing at all against that guy, just the religion that he spawned, which he really had nothing to do with. I bet you that if you could talk to Jesus today, he'd hate crosses too. If he saw a Crossbuster he'd probably say, "Hey, thank you so much!"

The other way it resonates with me is because it represents the power of marketing. We were kids growing up in the midst of the explosion of mass marketing. One of the notable things about punk bands is that all of the best ones had a good logo—Black Flag, Dead Kennedys, Minor Threat, Circle Jerks, and The Germs. It was interesting that the punk movement, which claimed to be so nihilistic, latched on to the methodology of creating powerful logos to get their message across.

**So many people have your logo tattooed on them now. How do you feel when you see one?**

**Gurewitz:** I find that really shocking. I personally could never get a Crossbuster tattoo, because the jails in L.A. are populated with Catholic Latinos. I have been to jail, and I can't imagine being there with that symbol on me.

**Graffin:** I'm the only punk rocker who doesn't have a single tattoo, but I really appreciate when I see our tattoo on someone else. It's a nice gesture, but are you sure it's something you want to have on your skin for the rest of your life?

**Brett, how does being a businessman affect being an artist?**

**Gurewitz:** I couldn't imagine doing one without the other. They're both creative in different ways. I'm constantly confronted with conflicting moments. There are opportunity costs or trade-offs, and we all have them every time we make a choice. But I've never been a pure artist, I'm a rock musician—I'm not Vincent van Gogh.



**You guys took a lot of criticism from the punk community when you signed with Atlantic. Did you feel that the criticism was valid?**

**Gurewitz:** Even though I was punk, I never had a problem with major labels. There are plenty of evil corporations out there—like BP, for example—but I wouldn't include Atlantic Records on that list. I don't think they are something worth protesting, because bands deserve to make a living. But back then there was a true Communist faction of the punk rock scene. The owners of *Maximumrockroll* were hardcore Marxists, but I wasn't and I never have been. Marxism is awful; it's led to mass-murder every time it's ever been tried. I don't see capitalism leading to mass-murder. It definitely leads to global warming, but I think we can deal with that through democracy.

**Greg, you're known for your ridiculously large vocabulary, which you wantonly employ in your lyrics. Do you delight in driving your fans to the dictionary?**

**Graffin:** I would like to believe that I have inspired people to do more than look up words in the dictionary because words carry with them concepts and I was always trying to motivate people to address the concepts. The idea behind using nontraditional words was to encapsulate a larger concept in one word, so it was actually being more concise. That being said, I do feel that sometimes it got a little out of hand and it was a little awkward.

**How have your academic pursuits intersected with your artistic pursuits?**

**Graffin:** Science is the first expression of punk, because it doesn't advance without challenging authority. It doesn't make progress without tearing down what was there before and building upon the structure. It's really frail at its core, because any scientific theory is only as good as the current observations that verify it. With new observation comes new theory, and in order to have new theory you have to challenge the establishment. True punk is always challenging. If it's not challenging, then it's conforming, it's not moving the genre forward, and it's simply stagnating, which is boring. Though there are bands that have proven you can make millions and

millions from being boring, but they're not punk.

**What have been the high and low points of Bad Religion for you?**

**Gurewitz:** The high and the low point was the recording and mixing of *Stranger Than Fiction*. It was the high artistically, because that is when I was at my creative peak. However, it was the low interpersonally because that is when my fellow bandmates and I were having the most discord and acrimony.

**Graffin:** The high, even though it's clichéd, is the release of this next record. The fact that we're still able to make records that we consider good after 30 years is the most remarkable feeling. There are a lot of bands that are 30 years old that are still playing music from their first album and everyone knows it was their only good album. I didn't recognize the low point at the time, which was when Brett left the band. I can recognize now that we were operating on only seven of eight cylinders.

**What's your goal for Bad Religion these days?**

**Gurewitz:** This is going to sound really trite, but I just try to write a record that doesn't suck every time. When you're on your 15<sup>th</sup> album and you see other groups trying to do it at your age, for the most part they're just embarrassing themselves. What I'm trying to do is give our fans a record they can be happy about. I don't want to be one of those groups that's kicking a dead horse.

**Graffin:** Our goal is always to provoke people, which is the goal of real punk.

**What do you think Bad Religion's legacy is?**

**Gurewitz:** Bad Religion is the band that revitalized punk with a new modern, melodic and thoughtful approach. We never had the commercial success of some of the bands that we influenced, but we have had good success, longevity, and earned a lot of respect, so that has been very rewarding.

**Graffin:** How about the Lennon and McCartney of punk? I'd be satisfied with that.





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BRETT GUREWITZ? HE'S THE NEW MODEL, HE'S THE MYTHOLOGICAL HYDRA INCARNATE, A SEVEN-HEADED WONDER. A RABBI IN A MUSCLE CAR, AN ETHICAL AND MORAL SO AND SO. HE'S ALWAYS REVVED UP AND READY TO GO WITH LEADERSHIP AND BRAVERY. HE'S FEARLESS AND PEERLESS.

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— TOM WAITS

#### KEITH MORRIS OF THE CIRCLE JERKS REMEMBERS "OPERATION RESCUE"

We were all rubbing elbows on the scene in Los Angeles back in 1979 at now-legendary punk clubs like Hong Kong Café and Godzilla's. You have to understand that back at that time, everybody was doing a lot of partying and carrying on, so a lot of those days are very blurry now. But I do distinctly remember going to a party out in the Valley with Greg Hetson [guitarist for the Circle Jerks] where I saw Bad Religion playing outside by the pool, which may have been the first time I ever saw them live. I ended up becoming good friends with those guys because we played on so many bills together and spent so many hours in vans together. Over the years we were always crossing paths and then one day they called me out of the blue when they were recording *Against the Grain*. The Circle Jerks had a song called "Operation" and so Brett and the guys thought that it would be cool for me to come in and do the backing vocal on this new song they had called "Operation Rescue." I knew absolutely nothing about the song, but I knew the integrity of the band and I knew where they came from on a political and social level. I knew that it wasn't going to be some "Oi! Oi! Oi!" thing and that there was going to be some intelligence behind it. Bad Religion is not one of these bands that comes from the gut—there's more of a thought behind the process. When I ended up hearing the finished version of the song, I was really pleased with it and I'm glad I got to be a part of it.







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THROUGH HIS SONGS, GREG GRAFFIN MAKES PEOPLE THINK CRITICALLY AND HELPS THEM APPRECIATE WHAT IS TRULY MEANINGFUL IN THEIR CULTURE AND IN THEIR LIVES. A LOT OF YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE TOLD ME, 'THAT GUY IS THE REASON WHY I DECIDED I NEEDED TO STUDY HARD. HE INSPIRED ME TO GET A DEGREE.' PEOPLE HAVE SUCH ADMIRATION FOR HIS MUSIC AND HIS PERSONA, BUT HIS PERSONA IS ALL ABOUT LOOKING BEYOND HIS PERSONA AND, INSTEAD, USING IT AS A JUMPING-OFF POINT IN THEIR OWN ACADEMIC JOURNEY. HE MAKES EDUCATION COOL—HOW MANY PUNK SINGERS CAN SAY THEY DO THAT?

— GREG EPSTEIN, HUMANIST CHAPLAIN AT HARVARD

**How Could Hell Be Any Worse? (1982)**

**Brett Gurewitz:** We worked on these songs in Greg's garage, which we called the Hell Hole. I remember Greg playing "Fuck Armageddon...This is Hell" for me on the piano, then we took it in the garage and played it as a band.

**Greg Graffin:** Bands like the Sex Pistols and songwriters like Darby Crash helped set a template for what was appropriate for us and our songs. We emulated them, instead of emulating The Dickies. I loved The Dickies, but they did funny songs that were creative and we wanted to emulate a more political stance.

**Into the Unknown (1983)**

**Gurewitz:** Greg played me his new songs, which sounded like Jethro Tull, and so I wrote some stuff that was like Styx-meets-Pink Floyd. They were fun to record, but I still don't know what we were thinking.

**Graffin:** I thought it was the punkest album we could ever do. Nobody understood what the hell we were doing, though, and we lost our audience. We learned a very valuable lesson early on: It's a privilege to have an audience and if you don't treat them with respect then you'll lose them.

**Suffer (1988)**

**Gurewitz:** I spent the time between 1983 and 1987 developing a pretty phenomenal drug habit and learning how to be a recording engineer.

I hadn't been in the band for a few years but Greg had kept Bad Religion going through his college years. I ultimately got clean by April 1987, when I had a chance to play a show with the band again. The guys found me imminently more bearable when I was clean and said, "Hey, let's make a record." So Greg and I each wrote two songs a week and in a month we had *Suffer*.

**Graffin:** I thought it was going to be a gold record and picked as the album of the year, but it only sold like 3,000 copies in the first year. It was the start of me recognizing that the Bad Religion sentiment really jived nicely with the scientific pursuits I was undertaking; I started to borrow a lot more concepts from academia and science for my songwriting.

**No Control (1989)**

**Gurewitz:** *No Control* was fueled by the momentum of *Suffer*. I would just sit down and write a song in 30 minutes. I was still working at my recording

studio as an engineer and writing those songs on my breaks. I would take off for lunch, grab a guitar and write a song.

**Against the Grain (1990)**

**Graffin:** It was all about how you have to challenge the structure of science and art to make progress.

**Generator (1992)**

**Gurewitz:** This was the first record where we really started to experiment and evolve, which paved the way for *Recipe for Hate*.

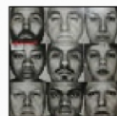
**Recipe for Hate (1993)**

**Gurewitz:** This was our first record that incorporated alternative rock elements and wasn't a pure '80s hardcore album. It had some good creative departures for us, though it all happened very organically.

**Graffin:** The title track was written in 1992, which was the 500 year anniversary of the "discovery" of the New World. The song was a reaction to all the sanitized stories we'd read in our history books. I'll never forget when our friends from the Navajo Nation told us how much they appreciated "Recipe for Hate," because it was their anti-Columbus anthem.

**Stranger Than Fiction (1994)**

**Gurewitz:** That's one of our best records and I am very proud of it. I still think "Infected" should have been the first single. Maybe we would have sold a million copies instead of 500,000, but so it goes.

**The Gray Race (1996)**

**Graffin:** The sounds we were using were different, as was our approach to making the record, and that was all because of Ric [Ocasek]'s influence.

It was very rejuvenating on an artistic level.

**No Substance (1998)**

**Graffin:** This was almost a throwback to our own DIY days, because we recorded it here in Ithaca, where we had converted part of my house into a studio. All of us were hanging out together, living in a group house and doing an album that ended up feeling really personal.

**The New America (2000)**

**Graffin:** [Producer] Todd Rundgren was my hero, so I loved working with him. He spent more time with me as a songwriter than almost any other producer and I still love the songs on that album.

**Gurewitz:** It had been a number of years since I left the band and it had been a tough period for me, because I had slipped up and started using again. During that whole time, Greg and I had not spoken at all. Greg is the one that broke the ice and asked if I would be interested in contributing a song, so I wrote "Believe It," which became an icebreaker.

**The Process of Belief (2002)**

**Gurewitz:** I didn't know if I could write a whole record, because I hadn't really written much music for five years. But it turns out it's just like riding a bike. Making this album was about relationship mending more than anything else for me.

**Graffin:** I always knew I was better as a collaborator, so when Brett decided he was ready to rejoin the band, I knew I had found my true collaboration partner.

**The Empire Strikes First (2004)**

**Gurewitz:** The Bush Doctrine of preemptive war is probably the darkest political event that I've witnessed in my lifetime. The U.S. had always been the good guy, even though the history of our nation is rife with all sorts of atrocities. The idea that we would strike out and invade a country on a spurious pretext crushed me to the core. Even though we're known as a political band, we hadn't been in the habit of making topical records, but we couldn't help ourselves that time.

**New Maps of Hell (2007)**

**Gurewitz:** I don't feel like we stretched ourselves at all; it was a little bit regressive and conservative.

**The Dissent of Man (2010)**

**Graffin:** The title comes from Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, but we twisted it because our dissenting opinion has always been prominent in every album.

**Gurewitz:** The record is more experimental, because we're playing around with tempo, tones, keys and instrumentation. It really showcases the band's evolution. **F**



