

SPIN

The American Devolution

Mark Richard on the

CHRISTIAN COALITION

Jack Womack on

PAT BUCHANAN

tori amos

Hammer of
the Goddess

Spring '96
Fashion

A Bohemian
Rhapsody

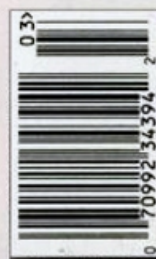
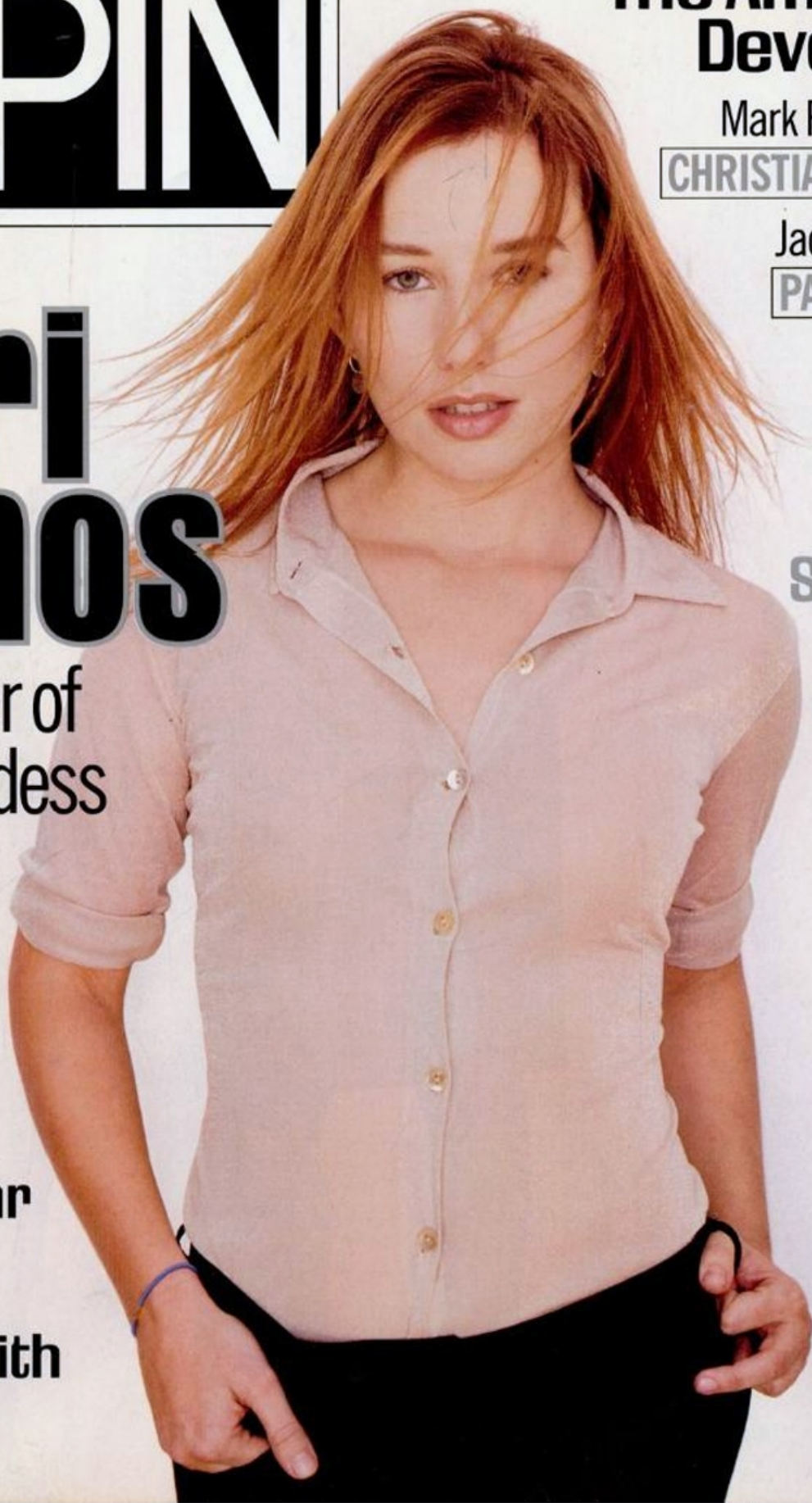
Coolio

Bad
Religion

Everclear

Pulp

Patti Smith
Live



MAR 1996 \$2.95
CAN \$3.95/UK £2.25

SPINS

PLATTER DU JOUR

9 BAD RELIGION

All Ages
Epitaph

7 BAD RELIGION

The Gray Race
Atlantic

BAD RELIGION ARE punk lifers. Over a decade and a half they've released two EPs and nine albums, all but Atlantic's 1994 *Stranger Than Fiction* and new *The Gray Race* on their DIY label Epitaph, eventual home of the Offspring, Pennywise, NOFX, ex-MC5 Wayne Kramer, and early L7. By the standards of punk purism, this is a varied roster, a lot more varied than Bad Religion. With one exception, all of their records have sounded, if not exactly alike, then remarkably similar—simultaneously distinctive and generic. The slashing chords are standard hardcore, the hard tempos slightly less frenetic than the mosh-pit ideal. Vocal harmonies and guitar hooks, the pop adulterations common to all punk bands with a life, are diligently subsumed in the rush. Although the melodies are never instant and only rarely catchy, they strike the ear as classic rather than hackneyed, because they're set apart by the contour and timbre of Greg Graffin's vocal attack. Rising and falling like a muezzin's wail, Graffin's hoarse, clear exhortations are the band's undeviating musical signature. On Epitaph's *All Ages* best-of, 1981's "We're Only Gonna Die," cut when Graffin was 16, sounds like a coda to 1990's "Modern Man" that for some reason was recorded on a beat-up four-track.

Whether you find this consistency inspirational or tedious—or merely, as I do, aesthetically engaging—it shouldn't mislead you into dismissing these lifers as hacks or journeymen. They're way too smart. One of the very few rock musicians ever to pursue a Ph.D., Graffin is a student of evolutionary biology, which lends his jeremiads about the end of the world an authority unapproached in the subgenre that formalized the apocalyptic tantrum. Guitarist Brett Gurewitz, who was reading Spinoza when he cofounded the band at 15, has lately exercised his brainpower making the Offspring's *Smash* one of the very few indie-rock albums ever to go beyond gold. That the best he's done with Bad Religion is 300,000 records sold rather than five million is a disparity bemoaned by admirers of these steadfast keepers of punk's eternal flame. Actually, the band broke up for several years after Graffin slowed the tempos and added a synthesizer on 1983's viciously maligned *Into the Unknown*, which Gurewitz—who in 1994 split to run Epitaph full-time—declines to keep in print. But either way, the sales limit is in keeping with the band's achievement—they endured for the same reason they'll never be huge.

Graffin and Gurewitz are organically intellectual lyricists with an unmistakable commitment not just to their subcultural mission, a hardcore hallmark, but to developing and verbalizing ideas. Josh nervously about Graffin's "thesaurus-rock" if you want, but recognize that his polysyllabic proclivities manifest a disinclination to condescend. When "Modern Man" talks "carbon-based wastage" and "eternal supply," you get the idea he knows

what he's yelling about, and the stalwart passion with which both writers bang home their themes of impoverished ideology, autonomous analysis, and the impending death of the Earth has earned the respect of thoughtful punks. But although there may be 400,000 of those, there ain't five million; the personal inadequacies Green Day and the Offspring thrash around in are a far more universal draw. It's great to set yourself the task of pointing confused young fans in the general direction of the end of the tunnel because you

know you don't have what it takes to lead them out—or to get out yourself. But unless you can provide at least the hope of leadership, your brains and principles will most likely put off a mass following. And the inability to ease the struggle with laughter may well circumscribe your natural constituency as well—awash in bitter irony, Bad Religion wouldn't know a joke if God cracked it herself.

Picking peaks out of a catalogue as level as the Isley Brothers', *All Ages* is definitely where to start upping their constituency that final 100,000. It's not love at first listen—musically, they're subtler and less ingratiating than that. Gurewitz, who is slightly (I said slightly) more reportorial and concrete, wrote most of the small store of wonderful as opposed to excellent songs—the not quite ironic opening credo "I Want to Conquer the World" and the not quite self-excluding put-down "21st Century Digital Boy" (as well as "Generator," "Flat Earth Society," "Walk Away") have an imagination and anthemic reach Graffin gets near only on "Modern Man" and "The Answer" (which he doesn't have, natch). But these are marginal differentiations, and as on the individual albums only

more so, the 22-songs-in-50-minutes gather compelling force, with Graffin's material equally essential to the gestalt you come away humming with.

As for *The Gray Race*, it's a hell of a record for a band that just lost 52 percent of its songwriting, proof that Graffin's voice and vision define the band. Four of his new titles, not including any of the four co-composed by Gurewitz's guitar replacement Brian Baker, would fit right onto *All Ages*, and two of those—the proudly subcultural "Punk Rock Song," and "Ten in 2010," an overpopulation prophecy—could be anthems. The rest power that sound and bang those themes, albeit without quite the hardcore drive of 1989's *No Control* or songful complexity of 1994's *Stranger Than Fiction*. A band so consistent transcends crass chronology, and if *All Ages* turns you on start with those. But as with all Bad Religion, if *The Gray Race* is what's in the bin it will be good enough.

ROBERT CHRISTGAU

