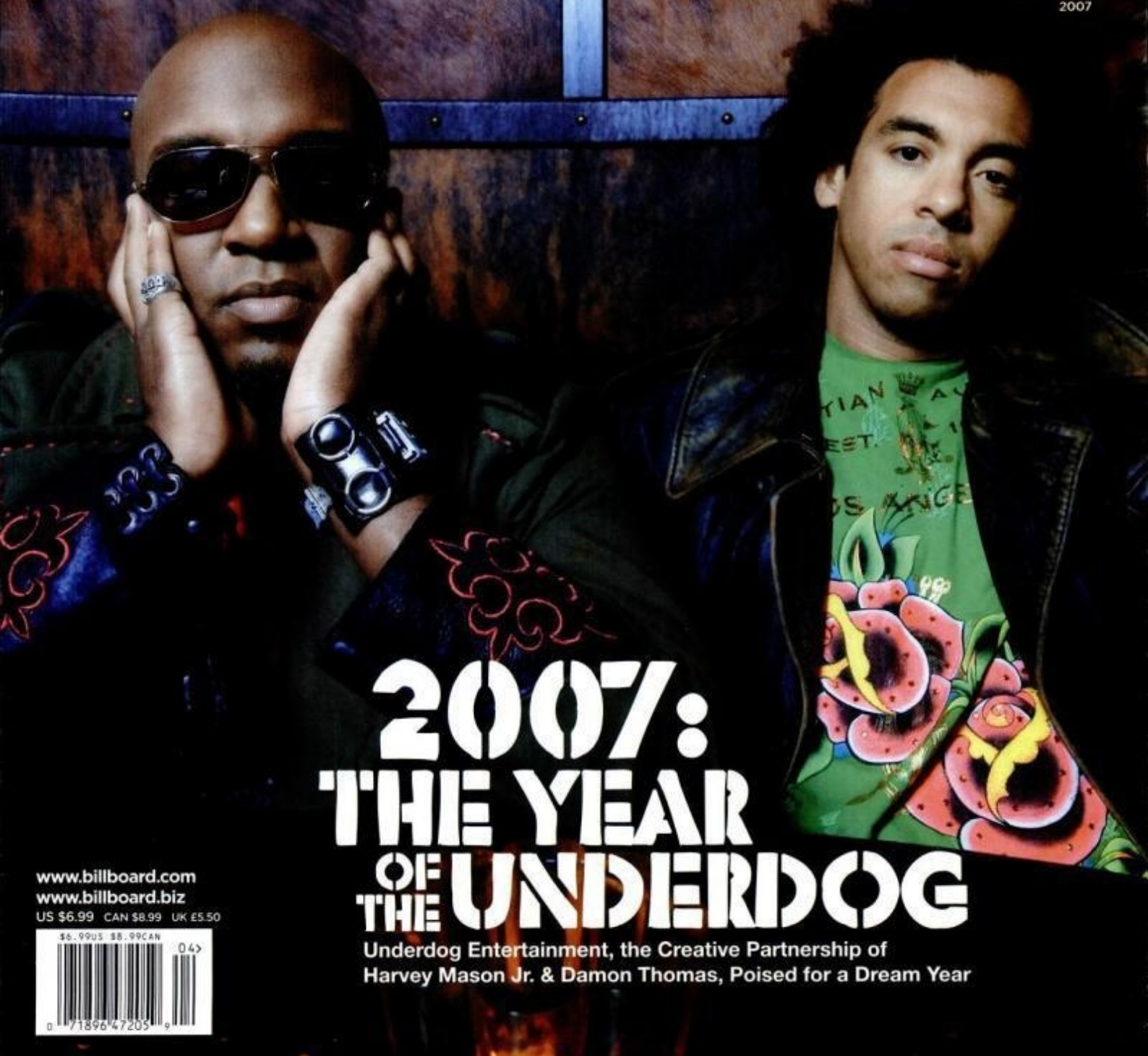


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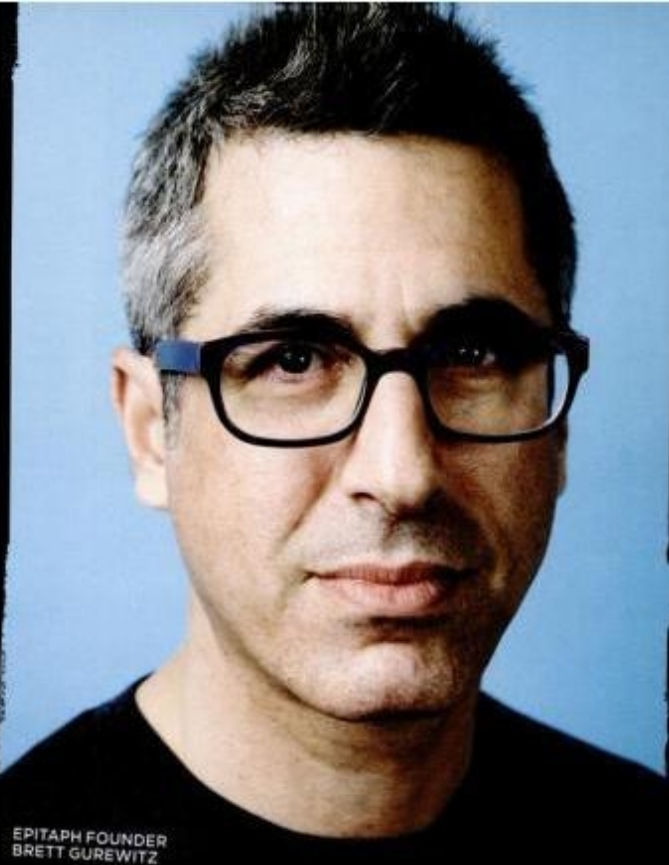




ESCAPE THE FATE



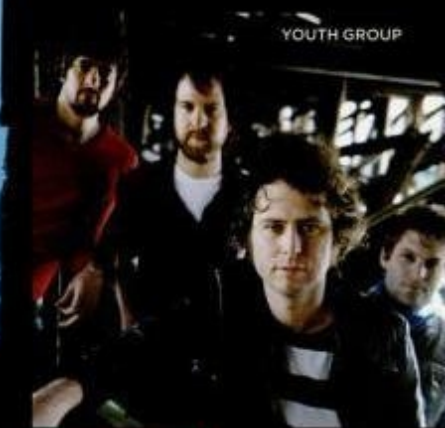
MATCHBOX ROMANCE



EPITAPH FOUNDER
BRETT GUREWITZ



I AM GHOST



YOUTH GROUP

EPITAPH TURNS

BY TODD MARTENS

25

SPECIAL FEATURE BEYOND 'CALI-PUNK,' AN INDIE LEADER
BOASTS DIVERSE ACTS AND GLOBAL PRESENCE

Spend a little time with Brett Gurewitz, guitarist for Bad Religion and founder of Epitaph Records, and it becomes clear that there are two distinct eras in his label's 25-year history.

Founded in 1981, Epitaph's breakthrough came with the phenomenal success of such California-bred, neo-punk bands as the Offspring and Rancid in the mid-'90s.

But with the 1999 signing of Tom Waits to Epitaph's sister label Anti-, it became clear that Gurewitz and his team could grow beyond punk as Anti- emerged as one of the most adventurous imprints in independent music.

"A turning point for Epitaph is when I began talking to Tom Waits," Gurewitz says. "I knew that I didn't want the label to only be for punk rock. I listened to more than punk rock, and more and more, I had wanted to diversify the sound of the label, particularly if the label was going to continue to work. That was a major milestone. A label that started as a punk-rock label in a garage had the audacity to sit down with Tom Waits. He's the Bob Dylan of my generation."

Today Epitaph is also a worldwide company with offices in Amsterdam and Toronto, and a presence in Melbourne, Australia. At the 41st annual MIDEM music marketplace Jan. 21-25 in Cannes, the company will be well-represented by executives including European managing director Hein Van der Ree.

The Epitaph label roster boasts notable acts including Motion City Soundtrack, Matchbox Romance, I Am Ghost, Bouncing Souls, Escape the Fate, the Matches and Youth Group.

On the Anti- label, Waits' three-CD set "Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards" was one of the hottest-selling titles at independent retailers this holiday season. The title sold so quickly that Epitaph's distributor, Alternative Distribution Alliance, ran out of a limited-edition hardbound version of the set within four days of its November street date. [continued on >>p40](#)

ESCAPE THE FATE: JAMES M. HARRIS; MATCHBOX ROMANCE: JAMES M. HARRIS; I AM GHOST: JAMES M. HARRIS; YOUTH GROUP: JAMES M. HARRIS

Such an extensive release would have been unthinkable a quarter of a century ago.

In the early '80s, Epitaph was a place for Gurewitz to release music by his own hardcore band and his punk-rock friends.

The label exploded and became a household name in 1994 when the Offspring's pop-punk breakout "Smash" dominated MTV and radio airwaves, and Epitaph followed that release with Rancid's career-defining "And Out Come the Wolves."

When punk rock was no longer trendy, Epitaph had relationships with blues label Fat Possum, Sweden's garage-rock label Burning Heart, ska/street punk offshoot Hellcat Records and a budding adult-leaning imprint in Anti-.

Anti-, no longer home to just Waits, won a Grammy Award for Solomon Burke's acclaimed 2002 soul album, "Don't Give Up on Me," and has since released albums from alt-country's Neko Case, country hero Merle Haggard and political rap act the Coup, among many others.

But even as Anti- has expanded Epitaph's catalog into blues, soul, R&B, hip-hop and country, it hasn't altered the rebellious, anything-goes, punk aesthetic upon which Epitaph was founded.

Andy Kaulkin, who oversees the Anti- imprint, says, "The label is for artists who are not trying to do something that's trendy. They're following their own path, and they have an understanding of music history without being beholden to it. It doesn't matter what genre it is. You can do that in any genre, and you can do that at any age."

Kaulkin's comment could almost serve as a mission statement for the entire label.

'THAT RECORD PUT US ON THE MAP'

Epitaph's story may begin with Bad Religion, but the Offspring is most certainly its first major plot point. The latter's 1994 single "Come Out and Play" could have been a barely heard anti-gun rant if it weren't for its still-unforgettable chorus hook, the simple, spoken-word refrain of "You gotta keep 'em separated."

Influential modern rock radio station KROQ Los Angeles took to playing the song, and the rest of the country soon followed suit. The Offspring and Epitaph would eventually split in a bitter divorce, but not before the band's overnight success turned Epitaph into one of the largest independent labels in the world.

"That record—and thank you very much, Offspring—put us on the map," Gurewitz says. "It opened doors. I could get a meeting with whoever. Up until that time, we had to scratch and claw our way into whatever nooks and crannies we could. It wasn't easy for an indie to get a record into a chain store. Indies were second-class citizens back then, but from that day forward we could sell any of our titles in any chain in the country. Everything changed."

And Gurewitz went from rocking in his punk band to declining interview requests with Forbes magazine.

"But he's always going to be the Bad Religion guy," Rancid leader Tim Armstrong says. "He was punk before us. He toured in a van before us. He's the one guy we all really listen to."

While the name Epitaph dates back to 1981, it didn't become a fully functioning label until around 1987, when Gurewitz ran Epitaph out of a recording studio he had opened. Key releases in that period were Bad Religion's "Suffer," long regarded as one of hardcore's finest moments, and rock band L7.

Yet it was the relationship that Gurewitz struck with Armstrong that would become one of the longest and most pivotal in the label's history.

Armstrong's first band, Operation Ivy, released only one album, "Energy," which was a blistering mix of ska and punk recorded in 1990 for Berkeley, Calif.-based Lookout Records. Gurewitz was a fan and set his sights on bringing Armstrong into the Epitaph fold.

"When I heard Operation Ivy broke up, I called Tim and said, 'Whatever your next band is that you do, I don't have to hear them. I don't have to know what you sound like, but I will sign you.'" Gurewitz recalls.

The story is true, Armstrong says, but it didn't happen quite so romantically. Looking back, Armstrong remembers Gurewitz



for selling records, more than any kind of airplay or advertising," Kaulkin says. "If you have retail on your side, you're going to win. That's the philosophy I had from working at a record shop."

Dave Hansen, who is now Epitaph's GM, started at the label in 1994. He and Kaulkin oversaw teams of young staffers—many interns—who worked the phones from open to close. "We had eight people who did nothing but call record stores all day," Hansen remembers. "There were three or four people just to call distributors. The company's backbone was in marketing."

The Offspring would leave Epitaph a couple of years after the release of "Smash." The two sides aired out their differences in the media, and more than once during a three-hour interview Gurewitz says he regrets the time period and the public airing of his opinions.

But as the relationship with the Offspring disintegrated, Gurewitz and Armstrong became closer, and the two plotted Epitaph's first major expansion.

In 1996, Armstrong started Hellcat Records, a partnership with Epitaph, and left the Bay Area for Los Angeles. In addition to discovering young talent like the Dropkick Murphys and the Distillers, Hellcat brought in the Clash's Joe Strummer around the same time Gurewitz signed Waits. Those moves confirmed Epitaph's status as a label built for the long haul rather than the mid-'90s punk explosion.

"My initial concept was that I was going to back up my hero with a band I come up with," Armstrong says. "It would be my Hellcat house band. That's not what he wanted. He wanted to make his own record. Not to sound like we were his kids or anything, but we were a label celebrating a style that he pioneered, so it made perfect sense for him to sign with us."

The Offspring's departure is not the only challenge Epitaph has weathered. A joint venture with Fat Possum ran from 1997 to 2003 and resulted in a legal dispute with Epitaph.

Gurewitz's personal struggles with drug addiction in the late '90s have been well-documented. And in another business setback, a joint venture with Warner Bros. to release the Hives in America ended after the Swedish garage rockers released one album, "Veni Vidi Vicious," under the deal. (The Hives had come to Epitaph through their relationship with Sweden's Burning Heart Records.)

Despite such setbacks, Epitaph has maintained long and loyal relationships with the likes of NOFX and Pennywise, among many others, and keeps attracting a number of artists who have reached "living legend" status.

In early 2007, the label will issue a new album from soul singer Mavis Staples and in the spring will release a new set from Country Music Hall of Fame member Porter Wagoner.

And even those who leave sometimes come back. After a one-album deal with Warner Bros. for 2003's "Indestructible," Armstrong says Rancid is returning to where it started. "Epitaph is our home," Armstrong says. "I want Brett figuring out how to market our records, and I want Brett to be the one who decides where we're going."

The label has also managed to stay relevant in the modern-rock world. Its pop-punk/emo signings, such as Matchbook Romance and Motion City Soundtrack, have allowed Epitaph to keep pace with younger labels. As Epitaph has strayed from its Southern California punk-rock roots to embrace everything from hip-hop to today's screamo bands, Gurewitz has heard plenty of criticism—some of it from his closest friends.

In response, he offers his detractors some old punk, do-it-yourself advice.

"I anticipated criticism, and I got it," Gurewitz says. "Even with emo. Punk rockers hate emo. A lot of the artists on my label have given me a lot of guff about the new signings. They'll say, 'Screw these screaming bands, Brett.'"

"Whatever," he responds. "They can start their own label." >>>



BAD RELIGION, top, and TOM WAITS, left, personify the spirit of Epitaph Records.

'I WANTED TO DIVERSIFY THE SOUND OF the label.'

—BRETT GUREWITZ

having to send him a bit of a wake-up call before he was actually able to get Rancid together.

"I don't know if Brett remembers this, but I was having a hard time getting sober, and I told him a few times I was getting a new band together," Armstrong says. "I remember him telling me, 'Send me your new tape, but I'm not going to hold my breath.' It hurt my feelings, but I needed to hear that. I'll never forget that, and now I've used it on people."

The album cover for Rancid's "Let's Go!" is tattooed on Gurewitz's shoulder, and the set was released two months before the Offspring's "Smash." If no one could predict that the two albums would suddenly turn Epitaph into the hottest label in America, Gurewitz knew they would at least be Epitaph's biggest releases.

"We had sent a few things to radio before with no success," he says. "I thought it was going to explode by being bigger than Fugazi and Bad Religion. Those were the big bands in my world."

The label made some efforts to expand before "Smash" came out, and Kaulkin, a professional blues pianist who had worked at record stores and Caroline Distribution, was hired in 1993. He says he took the Epitaph gig so he could buy a new guitar and planned to quit a few months later. Instead, he helped define the company's retail and marketing campaign for the Offspring.

"I always had this philosophy of the retailer being your best tool