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LESSONS IN

GUREWITZ: NOT BAD FOR AN 'OLD GUY'
BY TODD MARTENS

Independence

Marking the 25th anniversary of Epitaph records, label founder Brett Gurewitz recently reflected on the past, present and future of one of his indie success stories.

You were a teenager, still living with your parents, when you started the label. What do you remember of your parent's early reactions?

I think they thought it was cute. My dad's a self-made man, an entrepreneur, so I think the burgeoning entrepreneurship in his living room was thought of very kindly. They're still around, so it's been nice to come full circle. I was taking advice from my father on running a business and now my father comes to me for advice.

Dad's advice?

He told me that the most important thing is honesty and integrity, and having character in your business relationships. If you do that and have a good reputation, no money can ever buy that, and it sticks with you forever. I'm not going to say I haven't done some shitty things in my life, but I've always been a clean-dealing businessman between my customers, my competitors and my recording artists.

The obvious follow-up: The "shitty things"?

Well, I regret all the bad things I said about the Offspring in the

press when they left. We were kind of airing our dirty laundry and speaking out emotionally. I should have kept that all to myself. That's the main thing.

How has being an independent label changed in the past two decades?

We won a Grammy for Solomon Burke a couple years ago. We have Motion City Soundtrack, who are one of the best pop-punk/indie/emo bands out there. We've released hip-hop artists [Atmosphere, Sage Francis]. All of that was unthinkable when we first started.

We truly had a niche then. We were Southern California hardcore. That's what we called it.

The way to be an indie back then was to have a sound and a niche. That's what we had to do. Nowadays, sounds and niches are like an automatic shuffle in Vegas. A new niche is new every three weeks, so we have to stay on top of everything.

And the Internet?

From an A&R standpoint, I no longer have a world of underground bands to myself and a few other indies. Majors are looking at the same bands. In that sense, the competition is much stiffer. When



I see a band, I'll see another indie label and two other major labels. We're all fighting for the same bands.

Didn't that happen in 1994 and 1995, when every label wanted its own Offspring or Green Day?

No, not really. It was still kind of proprietary, even then. The majors would say, "Wow, how do you do that?" They still didn't know where we were finding those bands. Now, they have little crews of 16-year-olds scouring MySpace. And I may be looking at a band a major may be looking at, but I'm not going against them. Once it turns into a bidding war, I'm throwing in the towel.

Has Epitaph ever had a mission statement?

Yes, but I have never formalized it by writing it in a pithy little way. When I first started the company and it was just me, my goal was to be friendly with my artists, no matter what. I wanted it to be a family. At the time, the culture I came from, every band was getting ripped off by their labels. Indies weren't thought of a place you could get a fair shake. I like to think that image changed in part because of our influence. That's one of the things I'm proud of. I eventually became a little bit more sophisticated, and I realized that record companies don't make records.

If you get caught up in it, you can start believing that you make records. Your bands make the records. If you have a coffee mug company, you can make coffee mugs. But if you're a record company, you sign artists, and they make records.

With Tower closing and so many indie retailers closing, shelf space at existing retailers is becoming only more expensive. How do you break a new band in that climate?

I guess it depends on your definition of breaking a band. My definition is getting them to the 100,000-unit mark. I'm not saying that's a huge hit, but that's my world. If I do that, I've broken them. And it's much easier to get to 100,000 units today. It's so much easier to get the word out, and it's easier to get the word out fast. If it connects with the audience, you can get it in their hands in lighting speed. The real power today is that the Internet has become radio on demand. **continued on >>p44**

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from >>p42

As digital sales increase and physical sales decline, how is Epitaph preparing?

Keep in mind that as a fairly decent-sized indie, we have much less to lose if there's a full conversion to digital.

We have no vertical integration. We don't own any pressing plants or distributors. We're big enough to have all our masters on all the important digital sites, and we're small enough to not have the encumbrance of these giant brick-and-mortar distributors that the majors have.

For me, there's less to lose with a sale on iTunes, and what I have to gain is pretty nice. There are no returns. There's no overstock. I never again have to worry about overpressing.

Let's discuss the label's defining moment, the Offspring's "Smash." Talk about your reaction when you first heard the album. Did you feel you were sitting on something?

I can remember when I first got the finished masters. Epitaph at the time had maybe five employees. I was driving home from work, listening to the masters, and I circled around my block. I didn't go in my house.

I kept circling the neighborhood, listening to the record over and over. I listened to it at least five times in a row. I pulled in my driveway, and I don't know what made me say this, but I said to my wife, "Honey, we're going to be rich." I shit you not.

I don't believe I've ever told that story. I had this feeling deep down in my gut that "Self-Esteem" and "Come Out and Play" were huge hits. I felt it. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew it was by far the biggest record a band had submitted to me.

Prior to that you must have had dreams or designs on things you'd change if you hit it big.

I never thought we'd hit it that big. I mean, we were doing well. We were selling more than 1 million records per year before the Offspring hit. We had maybe 10 groups, and Bad Religion was selling about 100,000 records. We were making good living. What happened when the Offspring started blowing up was that a bunch of majors started coming around to buy my company.

They said, "An independent cannot do this." They told us they could make it go multiplatinum, and we'd have to sell half our business for that to happen. But N.W.A had just had a multiplatinum record with "Straight Outta Compton." That was an indie. Priority. So if a rap act can do it, so can a rock band. I was going to try it, and I turned down \$25 million for one-quarter of my company—just one-quarter.

THIS WEEK ON **billboard.com**
ONLINE EXCLUSIVE
An expanded version of this interview is available at billboard.com.

Did you take it personally when the Offspring left Epitaph for Columbia?

I did, and I shouldn't have. I learned a lesson there. It's business. It's not personal. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Offspring camp, and I feel extremely comfortable saying that. I hope they read that.

Were you prepared when Cali punk was no longer the sound of the moment?

No, I don't think I was. But I think we got with it fast enough, and I realized that we did need to become more diverse. We had an Atmosphere record, we had the Anti-label, we had ownership in Burning Heart, and we had Hellcat. I was diversified enough that when I was a little slow on the uptake, it didn't hurt us too bad.

There are some really great indies out there who have done some really great A&R. There's Victory and Fueled by Ramen and Drive-Thru, to name a few. They kind of picked up where I left off, and now I've taken their nod, and I think we're right there with all of them. We missed a half of a step, but it wasn't too bad for an old guy. ---

CONGRATULATIONS TO BRETT GUREWITZ AND EVERYONE AT EPITAPH FOR 25 YEARS OF STELLAR SUCCESS

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GOING GLOBAL

HOW EPITAPH TOOK ON THE WORLD
BY STEVE ADAMS

From humble beginnings as "a logo and a P.O. box" in California, Epitaph has evolved into an important international independent label, with a reach that—like many of its acts' appeal—spans the globe.

Europe is an especially key market, prompting the company to open its only office outside North America in Amsterdam in 1994. The timing was no coincidence as the territory was fast becoming enamored with California punk. Plus many of the label's leading acts, including the Offspring, NOFX, Rancid and Bad Religion, were exploding in the region.

"We had a lot of initial success with the Offspring, but nearly all our acts were selling very well in all territories [in Europe] at the time," Epitaph European managing director Heinz Van der Ree says.

The label's wholly owned European catalog still reports positive sales, but the market for its newer punk acts, such as Motion City Soundtrack and Matchbook Romance, has become much more fragmented, according to Van der Ree.

While the younger acts are finding their feet, a veteran is showing them the way. Tom Waits' new three-CD set "Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards" has been a "huge success all over Europe," Van der Ree says. The album debuted in the top 10 in a number of the region's national markets.

Waits' is on Epitaph's sister label Anti-. Epitaph also boasts a relationship with Sweden's Burning Heart Records, home to the Hives, the International Noise Conspiracy, Millencolin, Refused and Turbonegro, all of which have a strong following in Europe.

Developing that support, pushing newer acts and "developing a reasonable amount of A&R" (the label recently signed German act Team Blender) are all priorities for Van der Ree. But he also acknowledges there is an expanding catalog to work as well.

European licensing deals form part of this mix, and the label has been enjoying considerable success licensing Green Day's first two albums, "1039/Smoothed Out Slappy Hours" (1990) and "Kerplunk" (1992), and Tricky's last two albums, "Blowback" (2001) and "Vulnerable" (2003).

"Green Day is a good fit with our original style of music, but we're expanding and the variety of acts makes for a good mix," Van der Ree says.

Epitaph's distributors in Europe include Pinnacle (for the United Kingdom and Ireland), Play It Again Sam (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Spain), Bonnier (Scandinavia), SPV (Germany), Edel (Austria, Switzerland, Portugal), Self (Italy) and Soyuz (Russia). ---