

POLLSTAR

THE • CONCERT • HOTWIRE™ FEBRUARY 14, 1994

BAD RELIGION



BAD RELIGION

Bad Religion didn't need a major label. In the past, the band was courted by some of the biggest and didn't hesitate to send them packing. Through its own independent label, Epitaph, Bad Religion managed to consistently reach six figures in album sales and pack 1,200-seat venues without a bit of help from a huge media conglomerate. That all changed last year when Atlantic signed the band to a long-term deal. Atlantic quickly re-released *Recipe For Hate*, an album which had been in circulation for a few months on Epitaph. Suddenly, the group that — along with Fugazi — personified the do-it-yourself ethic was on the same label that created mass-market monsters like Led Zeppelin.

But then Bad Religion isn't a band that fits into anyone's arbitrarily-set niche. If your idea of the face of punk rock still has a ring through its nose, Bad Religion will force you to take another look. "We've never professed to be anything other than a band who makes music with relevant lyrics and aggressive beats and overt harmonies — a band that makes you think," says singer Greg Graffin, who writes many of the band's songs. He also holds a master's degree in geology from UCLA and is pursuing a Ph.D. in zoology from Cornell. He has taught biology labs at Cornell as part of his graduate studies, and he's married and the father of one young child. In fact, three band members are fathers.

Graffin thinks Bad Religion's lyrics are a big part of what sets the band apart. A recurrent theme for him though the years has been religion. "We're lucky we called ourselves [Bad Religion], because religion is a good metaphor," Graffin says. "We don't use it literally — we're not talking about bad Christianity or bad Judaism or bad Hinduism or whatever. Religion is a metaphor for prescriptive thought and organized beliefs — blind faith in organized beliefs. And those are things that are going to affect a person throughout his entire life."

Bad Religion came to be in a Los Angeles suburb in 1980 when 15-year-old bassist Jay Bentley, high school classmate Graffin, guitarist Brett Gurewitz and original drummer Jay Ziskrout (Bobby Schayer joined the group in 1991) started playing living room jams. In early 1981, Greg Hetson, then a member of the Circle Jerks and now a member of Bad Religion, played the group's demo tape on Rodney Bingenheimer's show on L.A. radio station KROQ. The band's first high-profile gig was opening for Social Distortion in decidedly un-punk Orange County.

Bad Religion quickly built a following, though no label was interested in releasing their music at the time. So the band created Epitaph to release their first EP in 1981. "I think in the early days, it proved that the real substance was in the music," Graffin says. "Because, obviously, we weren't knowledgeable or any way expert in the music industry. But we had a product to sell, and that was our music. It's almost like kids selling lemonade at a lemonade stand on a hot day. If you've got a product that is unique and has some individual flavor, people are going to buy it."

Gurewitz, who worked for a record distribution company, soon began devoting more time to Epitaph. Under Gurewitz' ownership, Epitaph now boasts some of punk's most renown bands — among them NoFX, Pennywise and Rancid. With his academic and family commitments, Graffin generally keeps clear of Epitaph's business.



L-R: Jay Bentley, Greg Hetson, Brett Gurewitz, Greg Graffin and Bobby Schayer.

"I try to distance myself from it because it was never a path that I wanted," Graffin says. "I never wanted to be a record mogul. That's why I live in Ithaca [N.Y.] and they all live in L.A."

Ultimately, the band signed with Atlantic because the label afforded them the opportunity to reach a larger audience, Graffin says. Being on a major also gives Gurewitz time to focus on other Epitaph bands. "The fact is, we're not making more money on Atlantic," Graffin says. "I think we have the potential to sell more records, in which case we would make more money. But by no means is the money they put up front any more than we would have made on Epitaph." While Epitaph has one marketing person and one promotion person, Atlantic offers a full staff, Graffin says. "As long as the label can convince you that you're a priority — which they have convinced us — they will put that staff in motion and they will give you the full benefit of their resources." That includes a distribution network that puts Bad Religion's music into more stores than ever before.

There were howls of protest from some in the punk community when Bad Religion signed with a major, but Graffin says he actually expected it to be worse than it was. "There are always malcontents," Graffin says. "If it's not because you're on a major, it's some other reason, like, 'Well, now you're playing three slow songs on your record when you used to have only one slow song.' So we've gone through this, believe it or not, every year for at least the last four years. And you have to hope that for every [fan] you lose, you pick up numerous others. Now I don't want to imply that the old fans aren't important to us, because I think the one thing that we can do for them is to be committed to our style and be committed to the consistency of Bad Religion."

Live performance was largely responsible for Bad Religion's popularity in the group's earliest days. Though the band slept on many strangers' floors when they first began to tour, that lifestyle didn't last long. "We quickly decided that we have got to be able to tour comfortably because we want to be able to put on a great show," Graffin says. "You can't do that if you're staying up at other people's houses partying all night." At first, the band relied on the contacts Hetson made from his days with the Circle Jerks when booking places to play. Eventually, Hetson led the band to ICM agent Andy Somers. "In Andy's very early days, he was an independent, but he booked a lot of Circle Jerks shows," Graffin explains. "Andy moved to various agencies and ended up at ICM." The band linked with its first manager — Danny Heaps at Addis, Wechsler & Associates — last year.

Look for Bad Religion to have a new album in the stores and be back on the road in North America late this year.

Cover photo by Lisa Johnson