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EYEHATEGOD

FATES WARNING

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MANOWAR

OBITUARY

SKREW

TESTAMENT

TIAMAT



Bad Religion has always been the prototype punk band—doing things on their own terms, refusing to give up, refusing to give in. They've steadily built their fan base since their inception in 1980, though not without moments they probably wish hadn't occurred (none-too-friendly member changes, the *Into the Unknown* album). People howled that Bad Religion kissed corporate ass the moment they inked a deal with Atlantic Records and abandoned the indie distribution of their own Epitaph label, but those two words hardly apply to their latest effort, *Stranger than Fiction*—it may not be their most original moment, but the only commercial nod about it is their curious and entirely unnecessary remake of "21st Century Digital Boy" (which originally appeared on *Against the Grain*).

However, the talk below with guitarist and Epitaph founder "Mr." Brett Gurewitz took place before he left the band to seize the reins of the label that's now a cultural phenomenon, having given us not only the multi-platinum Offspring but Rancid, NOFX and Pennywise, as well. At the time of our conversation, Brett was still firmly nestled within the band and Offspring were just breaking into solid rotation on 120 Minutes, but amusingly enough our discussion wanders into areas where the ironic foreshadowing borders on near-prophetic levels...

I guess the first logical topic of conversation would be the new album...and to be honest, it surprised me. It was like, "Wow, flash back to 1988!"
Cool—you're like the first person that's

caught on to that.

Really? Does the rest of the band also see it as a throwback of sorts?

Well, I'm not sure...

Obviously you do.

Yeah, I don't know if it's a throwback, as you stated, but to me it has the same spirit as our older records in terms of vitality and energy. I've had people say, *Recipe for Hate*

BAD RELIGION

was a progression from *Generator*, and now you've gone even farther in what you're saying, I don't see it that way! I just thought I wrote a punk rock record!

That's what it sounds like. It sounds like you're trying to say in one album what it took you all of *No Control*, *Generator* and *Against the Grain* to say. And *Suffer*...

Yeah, and *Suffer* as well. Was it in any way an intentional retort to the people that yelled "Sell-out" over *Recipe*...?

Yeah, maybe. What it comes down to is that every year I sit down to write songs, and I don't know exactly what's going to come. It's not like, "Okay, I'm going to make pasta Marinara" and I buy the ingredients and put them together, you know what I mean? When I write a song it's more like fiddling around and waiting for the song to come. (laughs)

Waiting for the song to come to you?

That's right. It's almost like there's a song out there, and I go out and find it. It doesn't feel like I write songs. I always wonder every year if I'm still going to be able to write songs because I'm not exactly sure how to do it. So it's not within my power to say, "I'm going to write this kind of a record" and do it. On the other hand, I knew what kind of spirit I wanted the record to have and so maybe it affected the way I approached my songs.

When you couldn't find a song, have you ever tried to force one?

Yeah, but almost always those songs get thrown out and never

made it anywhere. I just can't do that, I don't know. That's what you call writer's block, you know?

So this time when they came to you, they seemed to be more sparse and direct again?

Yeah...well, the sparseness and all that, that comes with arrangement and production, and I think that was definitely deliberate. Then again, this year we had a producer for the first time, Andy Wallace. So other than me communicating to him that I really wanted this to be raw and vital, I didn't really have a hand that much in that side of things this year. But yeah, the songs themselves have a real punk rock spirit, and I think these are some of our best lyrics.

As you said, Andy handled the production, which I thought was kind of unusual considering his past experiences—was he a suggestion of the label?

No, he was ours. I think he's done a lot of good stuff, which would make him seem to



be a good choice. He did Nirvana, Sepultura and Slayer.

I guess that's what's odd, just that he seems to have more of a metal connection. At first when I heard he was doing it, I thought, "Oh no." I was a little worried. Well, I always thought that a producer that's done metal could do good with punk—or not just metal, but speed metal—since metal has all those fast beats. I think he did an okay job, I think it sounds like a regular Bad Religion record, it doesn't sound that different. Do you think it does?

Actually it sounded like he had very little involvement at all, which is probably a good thing. If I had not known, I probably would have thought it was self-produced with a bigger budget. Was he necessary as it turned out?

Well, he was necessary in as much that he took a lot of pressure off me because I'm usually the recording engineer on the project and didn't have to do that this time.

You think from now on you'll stay with a producer?

Yeah, probably.

I'm sure the album has caused no small amount of turmoil at Atlantic since they've pored over and said, "Wait a minute...there's no 'American Jesus' on here!" But do you care?

Do I care? No.

Do you think the accessibility of *Recipe*... was a few years ahead of its time for the band?

No, I think this is just as accessible. I think that "Stranger than Fiction" is like a fucking pixie stix...you know, it's pure candy. I love that song. I mean, it might be a little more aggressive than "American Jesus," but it's every bit as catchy. I mean, I write songs that I dig—you can't try to write a song for the radio. I think the record has lots of catchy songs...I mean, I think they're all catchy.

I do too, but probably not in the sense that they would have hoped. But that's probably even better

Yeah, the last record had "American Jesus" and "Struck a Nerve" and Greg (Gaffin-vocals) wrote "Struck a Nerve" and we both wrote "American Jesus," but I know that when we wrote it we weren't going for a radio hit, we were just writing a song that mixed up the tempos a little on the record.

We tried to write something that rocks but was a little more mid-tempo to give the record a little more diversity—which we've done also on this record. I wrote eight out of the fifteen, and Greg wrote the other seven.

Do you find it amusing to have the "Alternative" brand stamped on what you're doing after years of recognition as just a pure punk band?

Yeah, it is, but on the other hand it's probably more valid in our case than it is of Pearl Jam. That's AOR...well, I don't know if I want to use any buzzwords for the band, but mainstream radio plays Pearl Jam and they'll play it right next to record by say, Hendrix, and they won't sound all that different. Whereas our style of music...it all depends. If we sell ten million records than you can't call it alternative anymore. (laughs) That's why the 'alternative' label is so ridiculous now, because the groups labelled alternative are selling far more records than groups called mainstream. It has sort of become meaningless. If it's alternative, what's it alternative to? Alternative to the records that don't sell? (laughter)

It's the same with the Top 40 label, where at one point you could hear all the Top 40 on the same station, but now it's so diversified.

Yeah, we're not what typically is called an alternative band—you know, the indie rock sounds of Candlebox or Tool, that kind of thing...that's not what we are. We're a punk rock band. But people can call us whatever they want!

So long as they leave you alone?

Yeah, really!

Now as far as the Atlantic deal, had you been approached before that by other majors?

No, not really.

So what made you decide to make the jump, other than the fact that it was the first legitimate offer?

Well, at the time we had decided to go to a major it wasn't really that they had come to us. The group had—oh, that's how it happened. I remember now—a guy, Mike Gitter, he's a rock journalist, gave us a call and said, "I'm working for Atlantic now, do you want to sign to Atlantic?" And I said, "I don't know, anything is possible. I'll pass it on to the guys." I passed it on to them, we started a dialogue, and it happened.

Do you wish now you could have made the jump a couple of albums ago?

No, I don't regret anything.

Is there any wisdom to the notion that indie status is preferable since good music should be found by people, rather than have it finding them?

Well...no. The reason I say no is because I don't think there's a reason to stay on an indie. I think a small, independent label affords an artist the opportunity to develop at his own pace and to find themselves as artists in a kind of natural, organic fashion. Sometimes if you go to a major, it's sink or swim. They want you to have a gold record and if you don't they'll drop you. If you're a baby group and you don't have a body of work and you don't have experience and you go on a major and you do have a gold record, then all of a sudden you're this overnight flash in the pan, which is not great for a musical career. It's too much of a burden for your follow-up record. On the other hand, if you're a baby band and you sign to a major for your very first record and you don't do anything, you're probably not going to last one or two records before you get dropped, and then you won't ever have a chance to realize your potential. I think that's the reason it's good for a developing artist to start out with an indie.

And I guess if a record like *Into the Unknown* had come out on a major, it would have spelled the band's end.

Bye-bye! Exactly.

Which have been more rewarding to you personally so far—the first ten years of the band's career or the last four?

The last four. I feel like I've really grown as a songwriter, and I like the music I've writing in the last four.

I've heard you like to keep a clear division between band and family...is that a necessity for the survival of each?

Well, yeah. Really, I keep a clear line between songwriting and family. As far as the band, my family will come on tour with me once in a while—well, not once in a while, every time I tour I bring them out for a few weeks, and that way we're not really keeping it separated. But I don't do a lot of songwriting in the house. I'll take little songwriting sabbaticals and get away.

Do you become cranky or irritable?

When I write? Yeah, I go crazy. And not only that, but I need solitude to write.

Is your relationship with the rest of the band like work, or is it an extended version of your family?

It's a family. It's like a marriage, we've been together over ten years. We're a type of family.

Since three of you have families of your own, and I'm assuming rewarding domestic lives, where do you draw the bitterness and cynicism from that fuels the band? Or is that why you have to separate yourself and find solitude?

Yeah, I think that's it. I'm a fairly complicated person and although I try as hard as I can to be a good father and I think I am one, that doesn't mean I'm content and complacent..and I hope I never will be.

So can Bad Religion ever be satisfied with the state of the world, or will there always be a topic that needs to be addressed and condemned?

I don't think I'll ever be content with the state of the world. I can't imagine that happening. Which is not to say that we'll constantly be confronting political topics, either. I don't know if I'll ever be content with the state of my soul, and unless you're a born-again or a Buddha, I doubt you are either. So there's always plenty to write about.

So it's therapeutic as anything else?

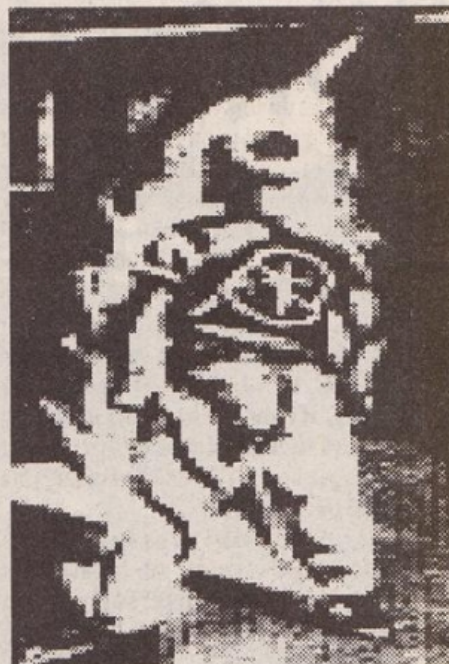
I don't know if it's therapeutic, since I've never tried not doing it. Art is important to me—it's what I do, in addition to doing business and family and other things. I'm creative, and art is one of the channels for my creativity. I'm compelled to do it, I don't just dabble in it for a hobby.

And I doubt you could be totally content just captaining a record label.

No, but I probably couldn't be totally content just writing songs and touring and just becoming an international rock star, either. And I probably couldn't be content making origami figures, either. (laughter) I have a

short attention span, and I have a lot of interests and I like to pursue them.

Ula Gehret



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