

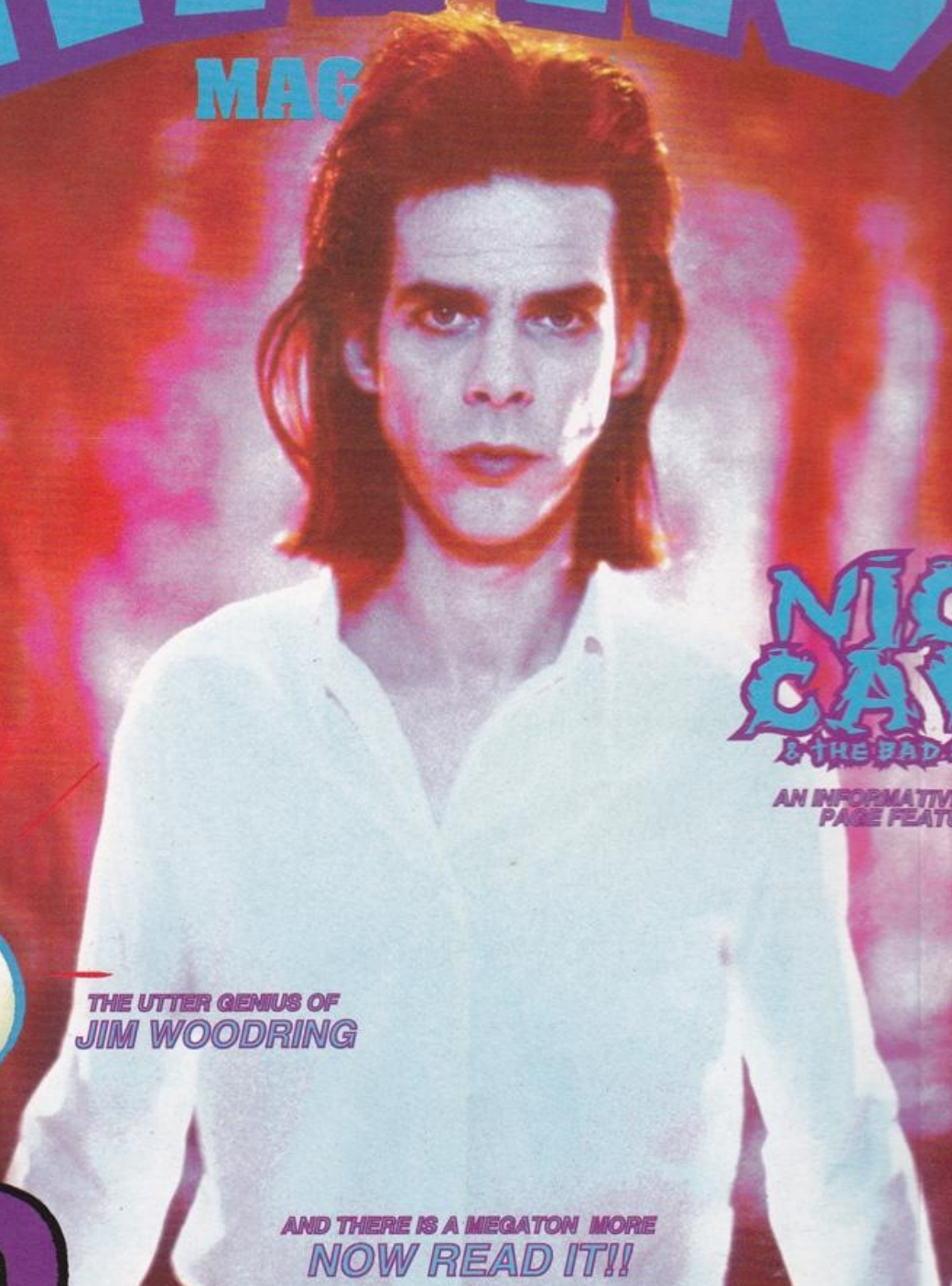
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# Bad Religion

## Today's Most Influential Punk Band

Fifteen years have past since a group of young high school punks started a little band called Bad Religion. Without a record label, Bad Religion released numerous albums on their own dinky Epitaph Records and songs like "F\*\*k Armageddon" and "We're Only Gonna Die" found the band a growing fanbase. Breaking up briefly in the mid-eighties, Bad Religion returned in '88 with the album *Suffer*, with a style far more polished and defined than before. This style, consisting mostly of a high-energy tempo accentuated by strong hooks and catchy harmonized vocals, quickly became their own and would be further refined in the years to follow.

Even with the mainstream's ambivalence to punk in the late eighties, Bad Religion's popularity skyrocketed. Significantly because of Bad Religion's influence, punk made its way back into the mainstream with Bad Religion being bigger than ever. With a major label deal from Atlantic Records and guitarist Mr. Brett's Epitaph Records becoming a multi-million dollar label with B.R.-influenced bands like Offspring, Pennywise, and NOFX, Bad Religion is finally getting their due.

The sun was still a few hours from setting when I met with the band on this Tuesday afternoon. As we began to talk, Mr. Brett and bassist Jay Bentley were sitting relaxed in their manager's office. Vocalist Greg Graffin would come in soon to join the interview, but we begin without him.





*At what point did Bad Religion really start to take off?*

"In 1989," responds Jay. "When *Against the Grain* came out."

Brett adds, "Suffer was a really good record, and *No Control* is a great record, but it's unheard of to make an even better record on the third one. Even though we were on a little dinky label with no clout whatsoever, the music spoke for itself. *Against the Grain* shipped 70,000 units the first day, which at the time was mind blowing. What you see now with radio, clubs, and MTV was caused from what happened back then. It was this quiet pebble dropped in the pond, and the ripples went out and out and out and have finally splashed on the shore—and that's Green Day and Offspring on MTV."

*When did you guys first hear punk?*

"I saw the Sex Pistols on TV in 1978," responds Jay. "It was the 1977 year-in-review, and they showed this five minute special on the Sex Pistols, and I was like, 'F\*\*k!' I went out and bought the Dickies' white vinyl single. It was the fastest thing in the world. I mean, I was coming out of KISS. After that I was going to Moby Disc and finding whatever Sex Pistols singles I could pick up."

"For me," answers Brett, "it was 1975, and I was thirteen. The first band for me was the Ramones. I had heard of punk before, seen pictures, but I didn't really know it had anything to do with music. I remember going to Moby Disc, and I saw the Ramones' first record. There was a huge ten foot high painting of the cover outside. I thought, 'That doesn't look like any record that I've ever seen'—these guys in leather jackets all with the same haircuts. I went inside and asked, 'What is that?' The guy said, 'That's the Ramones. They're cool.' Okay, I'll buy it. I got home, and, 'Yes, this rules!' It changed my whole life because I realized that I could write songs. I didn't have to be a fancy guitar player to write a song. I knew bar chords so I figured out a Ramones' song and thought, 'I could write a song like this.' But I didn't know there were other punk bands. And then we started going to shows in L.A. like the Buzzcocks, and they played with the Zippers and the Dickies. Skinny tie new wavers would go, but there'd also be these guys with leather jackets, short spiky hair, combat boots. I was like, 'Who are they?' My friend goes, 'Those are HBs.' That's what we used to call them—HBs. The hardcore kids from Huntington Beach."

Jay roars, "That's right—HBs—I remember that!"

"I don't know exactly how it happened," continues Brett, "but pretty soon, I had my engineer boots and my leather jacket, and I was going to the Starwood every Wednesday night."

Brett pauses for a moment, and then smiles. "Something they used to do back then that they don't do anymore, mercifully, was to spit on the band—even if you liked them. We'd play, and we'd get lugies hawked on us, so the main thing back then was to play with your mouth closed. Where do you think this whole thing started of looking down and playing—just keep your f\*\*kin' face away from the audience. Sometimes it'd be the Damned or DOA, and people would love them, but it seemed the more they loved them the more they showered them with lugies. The stage looked like a tropical rain forest and the band members would have lugies hanging off their fingers and arms."

*When did this stop?*

Jay laughs, "Spitting stopped when bands started going in the

audience and beating the s\*\*t out of everybody. When you start swinging a guitar, people say, 'Guess I won't spit anymore.' It stopped around 1983."

Brett recalls, "I remember the early days when everyone started slamming. And then Bad Religion crams in the van and goes up to San Francisco to play. Back then, San Francisco was like a year or two behind. We'd go up there in torn jeans, argyle sweaters, kilts, leather jackets, bandannas, chains, short colored hair, and they'd be long hairs with Devo glasses, leopard skin tights, and they'd be pogo-ing. We'd be like, 'What are you doing? You don't pogo—you slam!' It was a big culture shock."

Jay laughs, "Brett had the van so we'd pile on in and go to San Francisco. It would take thirteen hours because we had so many people and so much s\*\*t in there. We'd be on the freeway and couldn't stop to piss, so we'd be filling up potato chip bags and throwing them out the window. Whatever! We're going to Frisco on a f\*\*kin' tour."

*So what was the most memorable crazy show in the early Bad Religion days?*

"Era one or era two?" asks Brett.

Jay clarifies, "There's Bad Religion B.S. and Bad Religion A.S.—before Suffer and after Suffer."

Brett breaks in, "A killer show was at Godzilla's with Fear, TSOL, Bad Religion, Simple Six, and Shine the Light. That was an awesome show—it was one of the biggest shows ever at Godzilla's—like two thousand people."

"There was the Hideaway," remembers Jay. "That was the show where there was a big line outside, so this guy just rammed his car threw the door. Everyone ran in, and the show kept going."

Brett laughs, "There was the Black Flag, Circle Jerks, Bad Society show. Belinda Carsille was there in the audience. My friend Tom stood up on a rafter, looked down on Belinda, and pissed on her. But the Go-Go's were punk back then. They used to play the Whiskey. Before slamming was huge, pogo-ing still existed. There was a night at the Whiskey called Pogo at the Go-Go, where every Wednesday they'd have new wave and punk bands playing. The Go-Go's used to play there all the time."

*Which did you like better, Era One or Era Two?*

Brett almost solemnly responds, "As a teenager, I was pretty miserable. You look back and go, 'Those were the days,' but I was always depressed. I was weird, always drugged out—I don't look back and say it was paradise. Part of being punk was because I was so frustrated, angry and uncomfortable. We romanticize these memories, and say, 'Wasn't that great?' It's like a backpacking trip. When you're on the trip, all you can think about is your f\*\*kin' blisters and how you'd kill for a real hamburger instead of that freeze dried food. And then when you get home, you say, 'It's so beautiful and spiritual.' You never remember the bad s\*\*t—that's how you end up backpacking again."

Jay adds, "I'd have to say now there is an understanding and a focus to what we're doing. Back then, it was insane crazy teenage angst—we never knew what we were doing."

"For me," continues Brett, "I like how it is now better than back then, which is not to say I'm totally comfortable with myself now. I'm

probably a chronic malcontent. But if I had my choice, I'd like to be there back then with what I know now." Laughing, "I'd be having some f\*\*kin' fun! I wouldn't worry about half the s\*\*t that I worried about back then. I'd flip my teacher off and say, 'You know what? You're just a bulls\*\*t teacher! You don't know jack s\*\*t!' And she'd yell at me—'Young man, if you do that one more time, it'll go on your permanent record and it'll follow you the rest of your life.' Follow me where? Don't you think I know that I end up quitting high school and become successful anyway. All these things they said would follow me on my permanent record—where is my f\*\*kin' permanent record? Is it in some file at El Camino high school? How does that affect me now?"

Jay laughs, "People call up and ask, 'Hello, may I have the permanent record on Brett please?'"

"Do you know how many times I got wasted because I couldn't fall asleep for worrying about that?" reflects Brett. "Kids are warped by that s\*\*t!"

*Did you ever get caught doing anything outrageous?*

Brett responds, "Did you get caught for anything outrageous? No. The main thing I got busted for was not showing up for homeroom, not stripping for PE, being stoned in school, regular s\*\*t. I didn't nuke the cafeteria or put LSD in the punch."

"We did spray paint the school that one time," adds Jay.

Brett responds, "Oh yeah, I did a lot of bad stuff. I've blown up toilets with M-80's and graffitied the walls. But I never took a fall for any of that."

Jay comments, "They knew we did that, by the way. They just couldn't prove it."

"Really," says Brett without emotion. "Well I guess it's on my permanent record."

*Anything outrageous you didn't get caught doing you can tell me?*

"That I want to confess to?" asks Brett. "Do you think I'm stupid? Still, nothing I've done even pales in comparison to the things Fletcher Dragich has done (Pennywise)." Everyone laughs.

*What is your main criticism of organized religion?*

Jay snidely offers, "Pay to pray."

*Are there any redeeming aspects to religion?*

"Yeah, totally," says Jay. "When you grow up having the fear of God beaten into you, it's kind of an unforgiving God. But if you grow up thinking there's somebody that loves you, you don't grow up feeling awful and hated."

*Have religious people ever picketed your shows?*

"No, never," answers Jay, "but I did have a pamphlet handed to me once—like a little comic book. I opened it up, and it said, 'A message to you Bad Religion.' It was totally to us. How cool!"

*Last question—what do you do in your spare time?*

"I watch TV," laughs Jay. "I watch golf and bowling."



After a brief wait, Greg becomes available, and we start talking.

*It's pretty common knowledge that you're working on a PhD. I'm curious about what aspect of comparative anatomy you're studying.*

"I am studying the biology of bone tissue. I look at it under a microscope and compare various aspects of the biology from the earliest vertebras to the modern fossil. The title for my thesis is 'Development and Evolution of Acellular Bone.' The study deals with animal bones, but human bone doesn't differ from all the other vertebras. There are basically two types of bones—those that contain cells and those that don't. I'm studying the difference between these two tissues.

There are a lot of bone diseases that are mysterious, and there's a type of bone, acellular bone, that's mysterious because it hasn't been adequately studied. There is a possible link between the biology of the acellular tissue and certain acellular pathologies—so my thesis has medical relevance. My goal is to be finished within two years."

Did you do well in high school?

"Oh, I f\*\*kin' sucked! I had like a 2.6 GPA."

*What was it like being in Bad Religion while still a high school student?*

"It was my only source of release in high school. In L.A., high school is like social hour, so if you don't fit in, you're totally ostracized. I didn't fit in. I moved there from Wisconsin when I was eleven, and I couldn't get into the pot smoking, rock 'n roll hippie culture that was going on.

When I was fourteen, I cut my hair short, dyed my hair black, and wore a leather jacket to school. I literally got threats on my life for looking different from these f\*\*kin' heshers. I didn't have to worry about it, though, because they were all wasted out of their minds."

How did you hook up with the other guys in Bad Religion?

"It was a very small community of people who were interested in L.A. hardcore. It was easy to find people, and ever since I was a kid I've always wanted to be in a band."

Do you remember your first exposure to punk?

"Oh, definitely, very distinctly. When I was really young, I listened to pop radio all the time, but when I gained a little bit of an identity, I began to like music that wasn't so mainstream. I was really into Todd Rundgren. I started listening to KRQQ because it was the only station that played him. And then, about 1979, I heard this show on Sunday night called 'Rodney on the R00.' That was my first introduction to punk. He played K, the Germs, the B People, Middleclass, the Chiefs, all these tweaked bands. Soon thereafter, in 1980, we made a tape, and he played that too."

*Concerning organized religion, what are some of your feelings?*

"I get a kick out of some people who come to my door and try to teach me about the universe. It's usually a Jehovah's Witness. They come to your door, 'Hello. We were just cruising around the neighborhood, and we were wondering if you've ever wondered why there's so much hatred in society?' It's always something really nebulous like that. I usually say something like, 'No, I think I have a clear understanding why there's so much hatred.' They don't know how to respond to that because they're used to meeting people who never ask those questions. The sad thing is that so many people don't ask those questions, so their little patter works 90% of the time. I'm not saying it will convert people, but their spiel can be effective. With me it's not effective at all. Very rarely can they put together a logical, complex scenario of why we exist. Or I'll ask why they think we're put here by God. They'll talk about order in the universe, and for every example of order they give, I counter it with an example of

disorder. They hate it.

All around, I am not slighting people who find comfort in religion. That's their prerogative, and I'm not any better than them by not thinking there's a God. But I'm certainly not any worse either. People will ostracize you because you don't believe in God. They say I won't walk in the family of God with them after I die. What the f\*\*k does that mean?"

*Without religion, what then becomes the basis for normative ethics?*

"Does morality have to depend on religion? No. Is God the great polarizer of morals? I don't think so. I think morals are nothing but shared and accepted modes of behavior that most people abide by. It's sort of a path of least resistance, if you will, in society. If you go against it, you're bound to meet with more resistance. The ultimate penalty for that from a religious perspective is condemnation in your afterlife. To me it's a lot more difficult to live if you go against prevailing morals. In that respect, I think I am a moral person. Furthermore, I don't think thoughts should be considered immoral. Behavior is the most important element in defining morality. In that respect, God, who is really a thought, exists outside the realm of morality, if you accept my idea of morality."

*Tell me about the song 'Slumber.'*

"I know it sounds like a superficial song, but it's really about death and extinction. Death is an indication of hopelessness, and people equate extinction with a sort of biological hopelessness. With 'Slumber' I suggest death and extinction should not be hopeless but empowering. The song talks about a kid who's down-and-out, his life is pointless. The song is taken from my perspective that if you're going to walk around being miserable with your life, why are you living? You have to ask yourself, what is life all about? Too many people get caught up in the social and economic equality, and look at their position as one of dissatisfaction. My advice is that slumber will come soon, no matter how you look at it. Our species will be extinct a lot sooner than we think. We are going to die of old age a lot sooner than we think. Life is fast, and if you don't spend your life in a productive manner, you're wasting your time. The most significant aspect of life is that death is the great equalizer. If you are going to be completely down-trodden your entire life, just be glad you know in the end you're the same as everyone else. To me, that is a very uplifting idea. It shows that no matter how much superiority this person has over me, this guy doesn't realize slumber is coming fast."

*Final question. What's the worst job you've ever had?*

"I've never really had a job," laughs Greg. "I took loans out in school, and I loved the jobs I got at school, like teaching and being an assistant curator at the L.A. County Natural History Museum. I even went to the Bolivian rainforest to trap birds and mammals. But, I guess, for three months, there was a time of hell—I was the salad boy at the Chart House."

Story by David Jenison  
Lead Photo by Dan Winters

