


LAWEEKLY

FREE



DARWIN, DOGMA and LOUD GUITARS

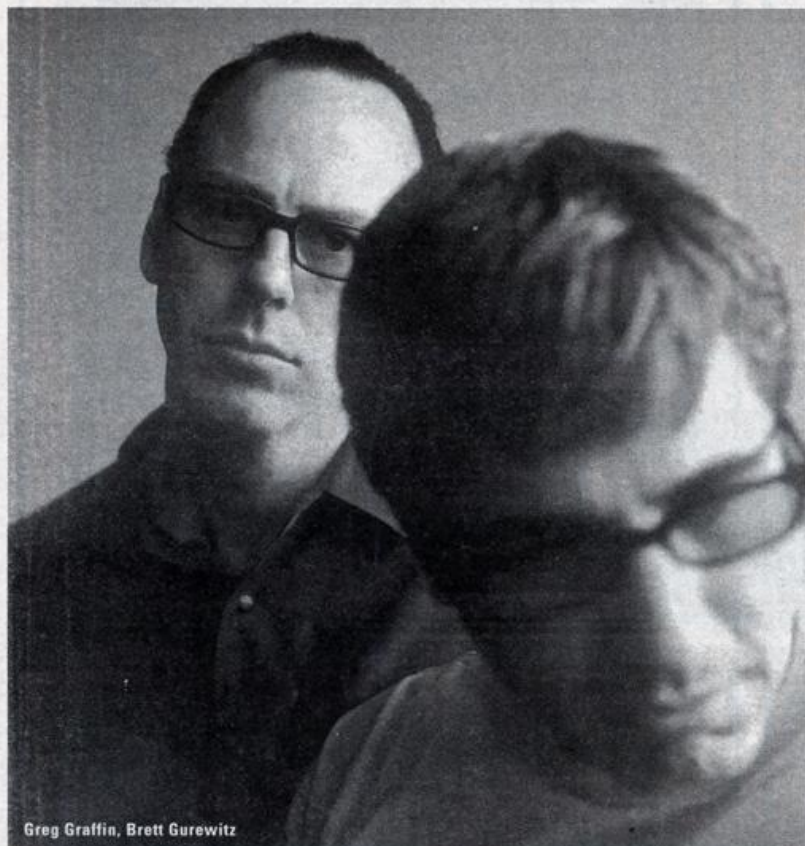
BAD RELIGION
COMES HOME

Who Do You Love?
Our Election Endorsements

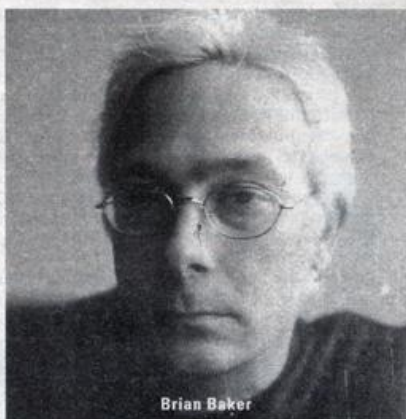
Misconduct: The Cop
Cooley Failed To Charge

Cruel & Unusual? The Supreme
Court and the Mentally Retarded

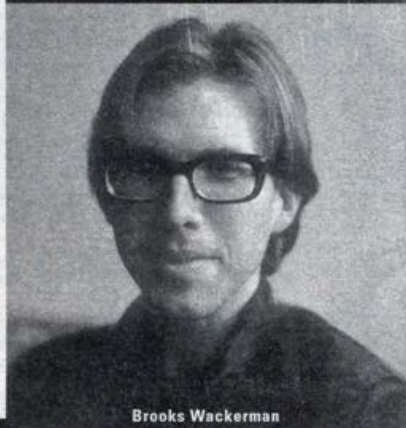
Patriot Games:
NBC and the American Way



Greg Graffin, Brett Gurewitz



Brian Baker



Brooks Wackerman

DARWIN, DOGMA AND LOUD GUITARS BAD RELIGION COMES HOME

BY BRENDAN MULLEN
Photography by Jack Gould

THE SIGNS ON THE HOUSE SPEAKERS FACING THE dance floor at the Roxy say no stage diving: "If you dive, you go home." This rule generally applies to everyone, but club management wouldn't dare enforce it at a Bad Religion show. Stage diving and crowd surfing have long been SoCal rock traditions, so when the younger end of Bad Religion's fan base swarmed the Roxy recently, the show in the pit at the front of the stage went on as usual.

Of course, once you get up onstage at a Bad Religion gig, or any punk-rock gig, you get your ass off there as quickly as possible. You don't hang around getting in the musicians' way; you don't act like the kid at the Roxy who relished his moment in the spotlight one beat too many. Security booted him.

"Too slow! Blew it!" said Bad Religion's lead singer, Greg Graffin, hands and arms outstretched toward the audience in an amused shrug. "Hey, you guys, you know you gotta be fast to pull this off!" The crowd roared its approval. Fists and arms flew into the air. The band pounded into its next song, and more kids rushed the stage to catapult themselves into the sky.

No one understands or embodies pit-kid culture bet-

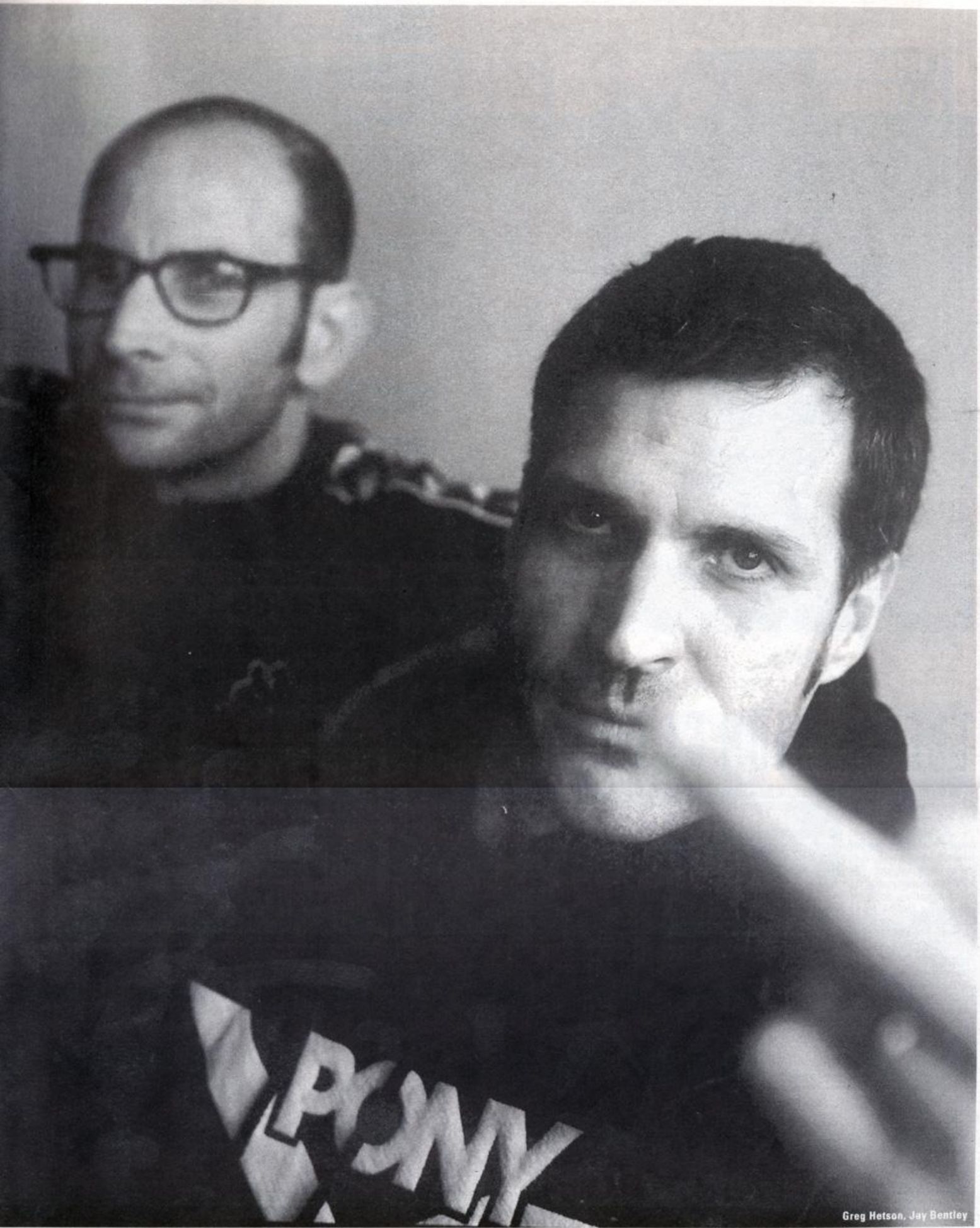
ter than Bad Religion, originally a gang of teen punk misfits from the north Valley whose core members were pit kids themselves before they scrambled onto the professional punk-rock stage in 1980. It's been 16 albums and a roller-coaster ride of career ups and downs in both the indie and the megacorporate record-business worlds for Bad Religion. Right now, with the release of a new CD, *The Process of Belief* on Epitaph, a label conceived specifically to put out the band's recordings, and still riding on the success of "Infected" and "21st Century Digital Boy," they're on a career high; thanks to regular rotation on stations like KROQ, the band has never had so many fans.

And yet, some wonder: Is it possible for a punk rocker to live well and have a successful long-term professional career? Parochial zines take harder snipes: Why don't Bad Religion just go and shoot themselves in the head and self-destruct if they're truly "punk"? If you're a contemporary songwriter, like Bad Religion co-leaders Graffin and Brett Gurewitz, working within the genre of punk rock, are you maintaining a tradition, or — as some know-it-all cynics would have it — are you simply wallowing in nostalgia for "roots punk rock," a musical style

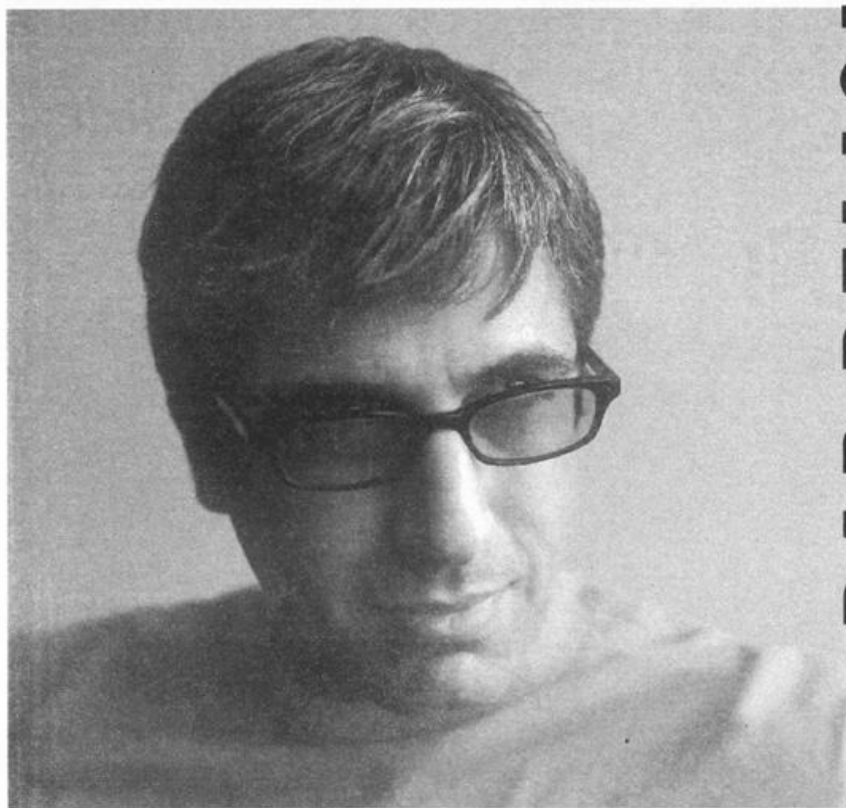
whose more extreme hardcore version began here in L.A. two decades ago? Is Bad Religion a keeper of the populist punk flame, or a ruthless assassin of the ethic that says no relevant fat-assed tattooed punk band plays to more than 150 people with ticket prices more than 5 bucks?

Whatever they are, the musicians of Bad Religion tore up the Strip recently for three consecutive nights: at the Whisky, the Roxy and the Key Club. All three shows sold out within hours of the cheap \$10 tickets going on sale (a special gesture from the band to help promote its brand-new CD).

The throngs mostly ranged from midteen skate kids (quite a few of them not old enough to drive were accompanied by approving parents) to mid-20-somethings and a few stray geezers. "The cool thing about punk rock is that at least you know where they are . . ." one 40ish mom commented with a knowing grin. Some fans wore personalized clothing adorned with the Bad Religion cross-buster logo and handmade slogans: "Commercialism Is Ruining Art," "The Bible Is Bullshit." Graffin has such masterful rapport with them that when they started hollering out song requests, he ran it down that the band is >



Greg Hetson, Jay Bentley



BAD RELIGION

phasing out this or that old tune. "Y'know, we all love that song, too, but we wanna try and move on and play some new things, okay? It's time . . . don't you think?" The kids understand and respect him; some of them even cheer him for it. So much for wallowing in the past.

Bad Religion enjoys an eclectic audience of punk-rock kids and skating/snowboarding rocker dudes, and is big in the life of a certain type of high school-age kid, the one who's quite brainy, maybe on antidepressants, frequently from an outer-suburban single-parent home.

Many of Bad Religion's crowd tend to have cerebral, geeky interests and some of them are even college-age. You could say they're kids who don't quite fit in, but then jocks and cheerleaders like Bad Religion nowadays, too. It's an odd mix. An ardent Bad Religion fan I met recently is a professional embalmer who schleps stiffs around a mortuary all day and styles 'em up for their beloveds while listening to Bad Religion.

Love it or hate it, the sleek Bad Religion-Epitaph-West-beach punk-pop sound of layered guitars and harmonized vocals—epitomized by the hit "Infected"—has become the soundtrack to the surfer-rooted extreme-sports-meets-punk-rock culture of contemporary Southern California, a phenomenon that was written off as extinct 20 years ago. This punk-pop sound and its offshoots and descendants are everywhere, generating tens of millions of dollars in record sales and concert-ticket receipts, through attractions such as the Warped Vans tour, an annual summer punk gala that makes Lollapalooza seem like a poetry slam in sheer numbers.

If you punch around enough local FM, you'll eventually hear a Bad Religion tune or a band that's been influenced by the SoCal sound Bad Religion helped pioneer, from the classic "rock block" pop-punk of Nirvana to the proto-"emo-core" of Weezer. To name-check the heavy-rotation list on KROQ and other "modern rock"—format stations: Green Day, Blink-182, the Offspring. For many teens and preteens, anything's better than radio's current

THE REUNION SESSIONS

BY JOHN ALBERT

BEFORE I DIED, I WAS THE DRUMMER IN BAD Religion. That was 15 years ago. Both of us are doing much better these days.

I found out about my supposed demise when I met the band in the small Hollywood studio where they were recording their latest album, *The Process of Belief*. (I had been summoned to write their press bio.) I hadn't seen them since my stint pounding the skins ended with my sudden, and apparently mysterious, disappearance. But I'll explain that a bit later.

Inside the studio, there was a lingering feeling of reunion. Not just for me, but for the entire proceeding. Greg Graffin and Jay Bentley were there, and Brett Gurewitz had finally returned. They were also back on Epitaph, which Brett started as an industrious teen to release the band's music when the major labels, predominantly staffed by coke-tooting Fleetwood Mac fans, wouldn't touch anything resembling punk with a well-manicured pinkie. The new songs sounded familiar, the accompanying conversations anything but. Some scenes from the sessions:

Greg is nursing a bowl of French onion soup in a near-empty Hamburger Hamlet. He is hoping the cheese-laden broth will soothe his tired vocal cords, yet in a contradictory move is talking up a storm. Having just completed his second master's degree, this one in biology at Cornell, he is

explaining the topic of his upcoming Ph.D. dissertation. (Both of us were raised by academics, so our conversations have always tended toward the cerebral.)

The premise is that naturalism (science) is basically a new and improved religion that allows us to view things as they really are and, thus, learn from our mistakes. Naturalism is directly opposed to deism (religion), but there are some scientists who hold that a belief in both is compatible. This is called dualism. Greg doesn't recognize. "Dualism is a cop-out that leaves the door open for an inaccurate portrayal of human nature," he argues, "which is what has led to all of the social and ethical problems of the past. If scientists take a soft position, then there is no naturalism and we're stuck with the old ineffective traditional religion, which has come to fail us in so many ways."

This from someone who started a band called Bad Religion in high school. "I think I hit on something at a very young age that is easy to be consistent about," he says, "which is questioning religion. I guess I take it seriously as a lifelong path of inquiry." Then he laughs. "Jay, Brett and me were all present that afternoon when we decided not to call the band Vaginal Discharge. Then it was gonna be Bad Family Life, but we finally settled on Bad Religion."

Back in the studio, a full-speed, state-of-the-art punk song is thundering out of

the playback speakers. Greg stands in the small vocal booth and starts to sing the lyrics of a new song, "Materialist."

I'm materialist
I ain't no deist
It's there for all to see
So don't speak of hidden mysteries
with me.

THE SUN IS SHINING, AND BRETT AND I are reclining in the studio's cluttered patio, just off the shimmering asphalt of Hollywood Boulevard. When not writing songs for Bad Religion, producing albums for other bands or running his label, Brett informs me, he likes to spend as much time as possible indulging his true passion. He shrugs. "I'm a total chess geek," he says.

Last year a mutual friend of ours, Alex, told Brett of a chess camp. "I thought, wow, it'll be really cool. I'll have a whole weekend of nothing but chess, and have expert guys coaching me, and I'll really improve my game," he says. "I thought it was gonna be like when I was a kid and I went to John Wooden's basketball camp—that it would be on a ranch or something, and there would be a lot of people there. But it turned out to be me, Alex and his friend, and one other guy, and it was in Temecula at the house of an old retired conservative judge. The same

vibe as both my grandmas' houses, like a mausoleum, with lots of doilies and everything perfectly in place." He sighs. "I mean, basically this was an old couple and we were sleeping over at their house."

The judge wasn't a master, Brett says, "but he had devised a methodology of chess coaching called 'Fishbusters.' In chess, there are different slang names for bad chess players. They call them 'potzers' and they call them 'fish.' Fishbusters was supposed to be his patented method for curing you of being a fish."

So there was the millionaire punk tycoon sleeping in a bunk bed in the den. "I was freezing all night, but I didn't want to ask for another blanket, because I thought this old couple was looking askance at me, like I was the coarse ruffian with tattoos invading their world."

The next day, "we wake up and the old guy has converted his garage into a little rumpus room with some tables and a chalkboard. And the Fishbuster just starts lecturing, basically asking trick questions like, 'How does a bishop move?' And we would answer, 'Diagonally.' And he would say, 'Wrong! A bishop exerts a field of force in all diagonal directions, creating a star.' He lectured all day and we didn't play one game." Brett shakes his head. "It was quite the opposite of what I had imagined."

But the next day, they actually got to play. "We wake up and the old guy has built

"THESE POT-SMOKING HIPPIE SURFER FREAKS DON'T WANNA SHARE THEIR FUCKIN' LITTLE BEACH WITH ME? BAD RELIGION BECAME MY ONLY OPTION."

roster of "angry nu-metal" simps and designer rock-rap show bands; for many kids, SoCal pop-punk is a preferable alternative to bloodless navel-swiveling teen chickadee singers and inane all-boy song-and-dance troupes.

Bad Religion alone has sold more than 3 million records for Epitaph. Each release automatically does about 180,000 to 200,000. Yet such sales figures have been dwarfed by other bands influenced by its sound, who have sold millions of records for the label.

Now in their mid-to-late 30s, Bad Religion's co-founding core members are three former students from El Camino Real High in Woodland Hills: bass player Jay Bentley, lead singer-songwriter Greg Graffin and guitarist-songwriter Brett Gurewitz. The Bad Religion-Epitaph Records saga is a complex beneath-the-mainstream-radar success story about Gurewitz and Graffin, the former an addict-in-recovery record producer and label CEO, the latter a zoology Ph.D. candidate and singer-philosopher. The other band members are a former surfer on bass, a Circle Jerk from Hawthorne on rhythm guitar, a founding member of the iconic East Coast hardcore band Minor Threat on lead guitar, and a child-prodigy musician who recently played drums in Spinal Tap.

As the final mixes were being done on *The Process of Belief*, I talked to the members of Bad Religion about their past, their future and the state of the industry.

SITTING BEHIND THE CONSOLE AT WESTBEACH Recorders, the studio he co-owns, both hands clasped behind his head, Brett Gurewitz perks up when asked to talk about the origins of SoCal pop punk — or "melodic hardcore," his preferred term for the signature sound of his band Bad Religion and the other artists on his Epitaph record label. Tallish and trim, elaborately tattooed on both forearms and shoulders, Gurewitz, 39, is showing a few distinguished silver streaks on the temples of a full shock. He's disarmingly candid when talking about Bad Religion's remarkable career and becoming the owner of the largest indie-rock record label in the world in '94 — then nearly losing it all to drug

addiction. He's elated that the band has come back home to Epitaph after a three-album affair with a major. Mostly, after seven years away from Bad Religion, he's excited about rejoining the band he co-founded with high school buds in 1980.

"It was terrifying at first. I was real stiff and inhibited, and it took a few shows to let loose. Playing in the band is that schizoid part of me, being a committed record person and a serious punk rock musician at heart. But I love the business side as much as the creative side, they're both part of how I think."

Still, "There's no love lost between me and the majors," he says. "I don't think their business practices are ethical, and that's why the old plantation-style system is on its way out. I like to think that punk rock, Bad Religion and Epitaph helped to contribute to this change. What's going on currently is comparable to the end of the studio system in the old Hollywood, where stars were no longer tied to these long-term exclusive contracts to one studio. Musicians will no longer be seen as a part of a record company's 'stable.' Record companies will become service providers for artists to manufacture, market and sell records, and the artist will pay the label a fair fee for these services."

Hanging out on a patio at Westbeach while Gurewitz is inside working the console — they take turns producing each other's songs — Greg Graffin, 37, has a steely-eyed, bemused look and a receding hairline. He's a man on a mission who sincerely believes it is possible to be a non-oxymoronic successful punk band in 2002. For Graffin, the relentless examining of authority and the rejection of dogma is the job of the contemporary punk; dogma, he says, is at the heart of all fanaticism, as has been borne out

in recent world events.

"My definition of punk de-emphasizes the anger, the violence and all the fashion elements and sticks to a basic principle of human biology: our need to question things. That's why Bad Religion is a punk band. That's what gives us the ability to say, 'Yeah, we're punk and we're proud of it.'"

Graffin posted this essay on the www.badreligion.com Web site:

The entire pre-Darwin Enlightenment period was characterized by ideas that shunned the dogma of the time. The ability to go against the grain was a major part of the greatest advances in human thinking throughout history. The modern-day punk thought process is a carbon copy of the Enlightenment tradition. Many historical examples exist that reveal a will to destroy dogma. It's a natural trait of the human to be original. Punk's dependence on objective truth comes from the shared experience of going against the grain. Anyone who ever stood out in the crowd feels the truth of this experience. No one ever had to write a doctrine for the outcast to understand what it meant to be "different."

Like most punk-rock stories, a big part of the Bad Religion version is about a bunch of high school misfits finding an outlet through punk. As a child, Graffin moved with his mother from Wisconsin to Canoga Park in 1976 after his parents split up; his father is an English professor at the University of Wisconsin. Graffin, a natural scholar, is a UCLA graduate with a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a master's in geology, and is now working with the zoology faculty at Cornell on a doctorate thesis on vertebrate evolution.

"I was one angry kid who'd moved from this wonderful neighborhood in Wisconsin to the wastelands of the San Fernando Valley, only to find they weren't going to accept me 'cause I was an untanned geek from the ►

a giant chessboard outside in the dirt, using that white lye they use for football fields. And he's made these giant chess pieces, figurines on top of three-foot wood sticks. We were supposed to divide into teams and move the giant pieces around, discussing each move. I told them I wasn't feeling well and went back to my bunk bed."

THE REST OF THE BAND EMERGES FOR A break. A discussion ensues about the strange foods our respective fathers eat, and the notion that when one reaches a certain advanced age, things that once seemed repulsive might suddenly become appetizing. His curiosity piqued, Brett sends out for a quart of buttermilk to test the theory. Twenty minutes later, we're all sipping surprisingly refreshing glasses of the curious dairy product.

THE MEMBERS OF BAD RELIGION ARE FEED-ing at a Hollywood noodle house. Everyone is laughing about a story from back when I was in the band and skateboard legend Tony Alva, on a bill with us playing bass in the Skoundrelz, submerged a stingy concert promoter upside down in a Lake Tahoe snow bank. I offer that touring is probably not so volatile at this stage in the band's career, and Greg shakes his head. At a recent show in San Sebastián in Spain, he says, "The entire floor collapsed. During the first song, everyone was jumping up

and down simultaneously, and this huge hole opened up, and 900 people fell down a 20-foot drop into a parking garage underneath. Ambulances came for six hours carrying people away. The floor just caved in right before my eyes, people screaming and trying to hold on to the side. Thankfully, no one died." Everyone nods solemnly. "And in Amsterdam," he says, "an armless thalidomide baby did a stage dive." I stand corrected.

BRETT AND I ARE DRIVING THROUGH HOLLY-wood after the band has taped a performance for *The Late Late Show* with Craig Kilborn. A crowd of sunbaked tourists had cheered as the band walked out and blasted through a new song. They had played well, but Brett admits he was slightly nervous. It all feels a bit new for him. We talk about how rare it is for bands to remain vital for any length of time these days, and Brett laments that perhaps it's just hard to be an adult and play in a rock band. I mention some veteran artists who are still popular, and he says, "Yeah, but you know, they're all really still teenagers."

Just then, we pass an enormous billboard featuring the airbrushed faces of multiplatinum-selling corporate shills Aerosmith. I groan. Brett is silent.

I JOINED BAD RELIGION IN 1984, WHEN THE band had hit an all-time low. There was a

sudden vacancy in the rhythm section, and Greg had heard that I was a drummer. That was only somewhat true. In reality, I merely owned some drums. Nevertheless, when he asked me to join I said yes, then went home with a tape of songs and practiced for five weeks until our first actual rehearsal. Punk rock is not jazz fusion. I carried it off, barely, and continued to improve as we went along. With only one original member in the band, Greg, it felt much like being in one of those oldies groups you see touring the state fairs, or, I suppose, the latest version of Guns N' Roses.

My first live performance was in San Francisco at a graffiti-covered punk landmark called On Broadway. I had been nursing a respectable drug habit off and on for years, and the night of my illustrious debut I soothed both my stage jitters and my withdrawal symptoms by downing handfuls of red pills. My memory is a bit mushy, but I do recall an enormous skinhead perched behind me for the entire set, leaning in and screaming encouragement from an inch away, so other than an earful of beer spit, I believe the evening was a success.

A year later, after the infamous show in Lake Tahoe, we all crashed at the plush vacation home of a teenage punkette whose parents had made the mistake of leaving town for the weekend. Morally infirm at the time, I absconded with a small me-

mento of our short stay, a trophy of a cherubic man swinging a golf club with the creepy inscription "King of the Swingers."

Within months, I'd sold all my possessions, pawned my beloved drum kit, and found myself in an empty room with only my shuddering despair and that strange little trophy. After running afoul of the law one night, I was abruptly remanded to an ultrastrict drug-treatment center whose mustachioed and heavily tattooed staff forbade all contact with the outside world. Thus, as I was informed recently by a rather sheepish Greg, it was believed by some that I had left this world.

Several years ago, visiting that same treatment center — as an alumnus of good standing — I heard a voice call my name from across the courtyard and turned to see a tall, rail-thin man with a thick, drooping mustache. He resembled a Jewish Doc Holliday. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be Brett, who had suffered his own well-publicized bout with narcotics and was now freshly on the mend.

LATE ONE NIGHT WHEN I WAS IN THE STUDIO watching the band record vocal tracks, they called me in to help them yell out a single-word chorus for "Evangeline" (consisting of merely the song title). We accomplished it in one perfect take, and after 15 years away, I had finally made it onto a Bad Religion record. ■

BAD RELIGION

Midwest. I was appalled. These pot-smoking hippie surfer freaks don't wanna share their fuckin' little beach with me? Bad Religion became my only option, all I had to be able to say, 'Fuck you guys.' There's an element in Southern California surf culture that says, 'You're not good enough, you don't belong, you shouldn't be allowed to be a part of this privileged society that gets to hang out on the beach and be beautiful every day.'

Bad Religion songs can be about many things: from religion, poli-sci and environmental issues to picking yourself up after a fight with Dad, if you're lucky enough to have a dad, or fighting back if you're hauled in by some asshole Christian Nazi principal because you're wearing the Bad Religion cross-buster logo on the back of your jacket. The songs are the longings of kids looking for self-expression, some of them emotionally troubled, or simply wanting to be heard. Many who write in to the Bad Religion Web site get Greg's big-brotherly advice, like "Don't show weakness... never lie to yourself, dude..."

"I read a ton of popular science," says Graffin, "and many of my heroes are pretty un-rock & roll, like geologists, paleontologists and evolutionists. Carl Sagan was awesome, because he took something that was so arcane — astrophysics — and popularized it. That was inspiring to me, to try to take this subcultural punk movement to the masses without diluting its original meaning."

THEY WEREN'T CALLING IT "HARDCORE" YET IN THE early days of the suburban-punk scene that first coalesced around the South Bay during mid-'79 with Hermosa-Hawthorne groups like Black Flag, Redd Kross, The Last and the Descendents, although the word was being bandied around to describe the attitude of surly teenagers from Huntington Beach who were just discovering punk. During the summer of '80, Bad Religion took it to the stage smack in the middle of the punks-vs.-cops war zone of the hardcore.

"We were suburban teen musician wannabes trying to mix the pop sensibility of the Dickies with the dark lyrics of Darby Crash and the radical attitude of Black Flag," says Gurewitz. "One of our favorite things that we all bonded over was the Germs' *G.I.* album."

Says Graffin, "I was inspired as a lyricist by Darby Crash. I think his writings are severely underrated as poetry. There is no doubt that had he lived he would've surpassed his early writings many times over."

To Gurewitz, Graffin, Bentley and their cronies, the most exciting band milieu at the time — which was gradually supplanting the earlier first wave of L.A. punk ('77-'80) that created the Germs — was the Circle Jerks, Black Flag, Fear, the Adolescents, Wasted Youth, Social Distortion, Agent Orange and TSOL. Full-on SWAT teams and airborne choppers were fast becoming a big part of the hardcore tradition.

"I was first attracted to Black Flag when I was 15 because of their relentless questioning of authority," says Graffin. "They confronted authority directly. It wasn't that they were violent against other citizens, it was that they had violent reactions to institutions that were detrimental to citizens' health."

"Agent Orange and the Adolescents particularly were a huge influence on us, as far as injecting melodic vocal harmonies into hardcore," says Gurewitz. "Those guys wrote quintessential hardcore songs with massive hooks that got under your skin, but the lyrics were so malignant, so evil, so nasty. They were the antithesis of Top 40 and heavy metal, yet their tunes were catchier than Top 40 and much heavier than any damned metal. It made these bands even more subversive, because they were about so much more than generic thrash punks

screaming about hating their parents and cops. They were like the Beach Boys on rabies... and they were getting on the radio!"

During the fall of 1980, Gurewitz had dropped out of El Camino Real to form Bad Religion with drummer Jay Ziskraut and two younger recruits from the same school, Bentley and Graffin, both age 15 at the time. Soon Ziskraut was replaced by Pete Finestone.

Gurewitz: "Rip It Up" by the Adolescents and 'Everything Turns Grey' by Agent Orange, that was the soundtrack to a riot for me as a teenager. We were total children of punk culture and the punk sound, we were literally the kids in the slam pit. We felt lucky to be alive right in the middle of this crazy, amazingly fertile breeding ground for musical and social ideas."

The band's first gig was opening a show that included the Circle Jerks, Social Distortion, TSOL, Wasted Youth and the Adolescents in an illegal warehouse space somewhere in O.C. They soon began honing their live chops at the Vex in East L.A., Bards Apollo in the West Adams district and Godzilla's in Sun Valley. They also played boxing arenas, and roller rinks like the Thunderbird and the Galaxy — basically anywhere that would take them.

While Graffin looked up to Darby Crash, Black Flag leader and SST founder Greg Ginn was Gurewitz's inspiration. "Here was a musician and a songwriter who rocked his own band and his own label and did exactly what he wanted to do. I wanted to be like him before I'd even heard the term *DIY* applied to music."

Bass player Jay Bentley, also 37, is the devoted father of two preteen boys. He's chatty, talking away by phone from his home in Vancouver, B.C. "Dude, I'm warning you," he laughs, "you'll have to cut me off, because I'll go on forever."

"One day at El Camino, Graffin said, 'Hey, we're getting a band together.' I was like, 'Great, I got a guitar, I can play guitar.' He said, 'We don't need a guitar player, we need a bass player.' I'm like, 'What's that?' He said, 'C'mon, dude, get with it, the one with four strings!' I thought, 'Oh, yeah, I can do that.'"

"The football players and the jocks were always ripping on Greg and me. But within a couple of years these same shithheads were all in the slam pit just beating on each other, and we were like, 'Dude, why don't you just go back and play football?' L.A. punk back then was great fun, but it was also pretty seedy and dirty and angry, and it was scary, too."

Guitarist Greg Hetson — the "other Greg" in Bad Religion — is a veteran musician of the whole L.A. punk-rock meatball. A former student at Hawthorne High, Hetson has also known no other life than professional punk rock. He first became involved with music as a member of another essential South Bay pop-punk band, Redd Kross, before co-founding the Circle Jerks with hardcore icon Keith Morris.

"These guys approached me in the parking lot at Oki Dog after a Circle Jerks gig," he says. "I think it was Greg Graffin or Jay who said, 'Hi, we're Bad Religion, we're a band from the Valley, would you listen to our tape?' I said, 'Sure, I will, and if I like it I'll take it with me to Rodney [KROQ DJ Bingenheimer] when we go to be interviewed tomorrow night.' Little did I know that I'd wind up joining the band at a later date."

Bad Religion was slowly becoming known among L.A.'s second wave of punkers as "that Valley band." They had no scene baggage from the Hollywood version of punk that had already played out. They weren't from any of the South Bay punk enclaves, nor were they from Fullerton, or that notorious Skinhead Army burg, Huntington Beach. Bad Religion took it to the stage probably minutes before the second wave started to be called "hardcore."

ENCOURAGED BY HIS ENTREPRENEUR FATHER, DICK Gurewitz, Brett had borrowed the cash to record six songs at Studio 9, a cheapo eight-track facility in Hollywood. The 1980 *Bad Religion* 7-inch EP, including Gurewitz and Graffin titles such as "Bad Religion," "Politics," "Drastic Actions," "Slaves," "Sensory Overload" and "World War 3," quickly sold out 1,500 copies thanks to instant radio exposure from Rodney on KROQ.

"There was no plan to start some big-time record label," says Gurewitz. "We just wanted to get our shit out there like everybody else, and we needed a name on the labels, so we came up with Epitaph. I think I stole the name from King Crimson." He laughs sheepishly at the idea of being caught bong-grooving on a headset to the potentates of prog-rock.

The *Bad Religion* EP sold well, followed by the Jim Mankey-produced *How Could Hell Be Any Worse* LP in 1981, which sold 10,000, a huge hit in the DIY punk-rock world. The debut album by the Vandals, then signed to Epitaph, also sold well. But, says Gurewitz, "The follow-up to the *How Could Hell* record tanked so badly, it was obvious I didn't know what the hell I was doing running a label — the quick success was all beginner's luck. I also had this monstrously escalating dope habit, which caused a serious misjudgment of musical direction, which cost us our entire fan base."

Gurewitz shuttered shop and went back to square one to learn audio engineering and production, and record retail and distribution, from scratch.

"I did sales for Sounds Good [record distributor] and learned about retail from Suzy Shaw at Bomp. I took engineering classes and eventually got Westbeach Recorders up and running with Donnell Cameron."

Disappointed, Bad Religion broke up; Graffin and Finestone went to college, while Bentley joined Wasted Youth and later TSOL. But it was a fortuitous temporary disbanding. By '83, the epochal glory years of L.A.'s second wave were over, although Graffin and Hetson played many intermittent small-club and college shows as Bad Religion with varying lineups from '84 to '87 and released one EP that kept the band ticking.

Punk rock's "dark years" descended circa '85 to '91. Nearly all the original SoCal hardcore bands had broken up, and even hardcore's biggest local luminary, Black Flag, had thrown in the towel. Nobody else was doing hardcore on any sizable scale. Punk rock was largely gone except in garages, youth centers like Gilman Street in Berkeley, and a smattering of tiny bars and clubs that allowed all-ages shows.

In April '87, Gurewitz finally committed to rehab and was soon invited to rejoin Bad Religion. He began to write new songs for what would become the classic *Suffer* album, and decided to resurrect Epitaph for another go.

"The Bad Religion offer came when I was burning on the engineering thing. Westbeach [in those days] was so bottom-of-the-barrel that sometimes we'd finish up working for free. Twelve-hour days, seven days a week — it was brutal and demoralizing, because even after putting in all these hours I was still barely covering my end in a one-room single in Hollywood."

"I'd finally gotten clean, rejoined the band. I was totally re-psyched. Why not resurrect Epitaph, why not try again? I put together a business plan and shopped it around every bank in town, but nobody would put up. In the end, my father, Dick Gurewitz, co-signed for a \$20,000 loan. There was no other legal way Epitaph could have been re-launched at that time."

Epitaph Mark 2 produced Bad Religion's *Suffer* and a slew of other albums around 1988-89 by the Little Kings, Thelonious Monster, L7, NOFX and Pennywise, most of which sold healthy numbers for an indie.

Bad Religion was back with a bang, and for some strange reason, so was punk rock. *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* and *Flipside* both named *Suffer* their album of the year in 1988, an amazing endorsement given the finicky punker-than-thou natures of these two key publications.

Says Graffin, "By 1985-86, there was hardly any punk rock left. There were very few bands that could draw any people anywhere in America, and worse, there were no new, vital labels. That was the big-picture context, and it was one of the main reasons Bad Religion was hailed as fresh when the *Suffer* album came out in '88. In Germany, we were feted as the 'saviors of punk.'"

But there were two other major factors that helped put the whole package over.

"The birth of the personal computer coinciding with the launching of a small DIY enterprise was really my biggest break," says Gurewitz. "The average PC skills of all Epitaph employees — both in graphics and spreadsheets — are pretty advanced." Gurewitz's other ace in the hole

BAD RELIGION

was bringing in musician-turned-marketing whiz Andy Kaulkin in '93 to supercharge Epitaph's sophisticated data system. Kaulkin's chops were developed at Al Bell's Belmont label. Between Gurewitz and Kaulkin, Epitaph had it wired, and the company surged forward to become the leanest and meanest big-time indie of the '90s.

THINGS WERE GOING GREAT. JAY BENTLEY BEGAN working as product manager at the label. Epitaph was on a modest roll, making some money and paying its bills, and Gurewitz stayed with Bad Religion as guitarist, co-writer and producer, making one record a year with them until '94. In 1991 Pete Finestone had been replaced by drummer Bobby Schayer, who left last year because of a debilitating shoulder condition. Schayer has been replaced by Brooks Wackerman, 24; Wackerman also played with Suicidal Tendencies for many years.

Talks were already under way between Bad Religion and Atlantic Records when Nirvana came down from heaven to blow away all the MTV big-hair metal-lite dweeb bands. Atlantic suits paid bushy-tailed young A&R informants pots of money to learn that if an ultrahard guitar band like Nirvana could jackpot for Geffen after honing their recording chops at a small indie like Sub Pop, then Bad Religion, another band that had drummed up a surefire fan base, could make a similar leap from Epitaph to Atlantic.

To complicate things further for Bad Religion, Gurewitz had signed Rancid and the Offspring to Epitaph, and by '94, sales of the Offspring's *Smash* album (which eventually sold 9 million worldwide) were going through the roof. It was a landmark feat in the history of the record business for an indie with no help from a major to keep up with pressing and distribution. With multiplatinum and gold sales from titles by the Offspring, Rancid and other bands, Epitaph grossed \$64 million in 1994. Since that time, Gurewitz has received many offers from major conglomerates to sell.

Gurewitz will go down in music biz history as the guy who walked away from a \$200 million deal to sell Epitaph, which would have put 100 in cash and 100 in stock into his pocket, as part of a consortium with rap biz high-rollers Jimmy Iovine, Suge Knight and Bryan Turner. "How much money do you need in this life to be happy?" he says. "I was like, 'Check your head, dude, look who you're going into business with.' I'd rather keep my company. For me, the music comes before the cheddar. Y'know, all I ever really wanted out of the game was a '66 Camaro. And I got that. So what could I spend \$100 million on in this lifetime? I'd rather have peace of mind."

Even so, Epitaph's success rearranged the entire apple cart for Bad Religion. While *Smash* was blowing up, the band was polishing the appropriately titled *Stranger Than Fiction* album for Atlantic (the first of a four-album deal). But Gurewitz left the band to work at Epitaph full time, an agonizing decision that nearly destroyed the band a second time. From Gurewitz's standpoint, it was just not humanly possible to tour with a band and run a label that was suddenly shipping millions of records.

"I had my own label with an album that had just gone multiplatinum," he says, "so it made no sense for me to become an Atlantic recording artist at that time. I was 32 years old. It was time to settle down into the business side of things. I did the best I could, but me having to quit didn't prevent them from touring."

Washington, D.C., guitarist Brian Baker, formerly of Minor Threat, Dag Nasty, the Meatmen, Junkyard and other groups, became Gurewitz's replacement for the tour and has been a full-time member ever since.

"From nowhere, Epitaph became the biggest indie

record label in the world," says Gurewitz. "We got a two-page spread in *Newsweek*. I had no perspective. I started to think I was invincible, infallible. I was so deluded, I was believing everything I touched turned to gold. I was the toast of the record business." He lapses into 12-Step-speak: "I took a glass of wine to celebrate, and from that I gradually slipped back on to dope, because drinking slowly made me stop doing the things I needed to do to stay clean, and I wound up blowing off seven and a half years of sobriety."

At the peak of the label's huge success, envious majors conspired to acquire the Offspring from Epitaph. If Gurewitz was unwilling to sell, one ruthless raider was determined to grab the band using any legal means necessary. The Offspring were wrenched away in a bloody battle that depleted company morale and left its founder emotionally gutted.

"The big lesson I learned is that if the band flies the coop, it's just another day in paradise and you move on," he says. "I made the mistake of taking it all personally, and fell off the wagon big time. I was a mess. I was also going through an intense divorce where children were involved. It took me four years to get clean again." Andy Kaulkin was promoted to company president and given a bigger equity stake to run the day-to-day while Gurewitz began the fight back from the abyss of heroin and cocaine addiction. A brutal article in a local free newspaper gloated gratuitously over Gurewitz's downfall; the cover image showed a tombstone etched with the words "Epitaph RIP."

Gurewitz: "I nearly died. I was arrested after I OD'd, and someone called 911. Cops found dope on me. After I came out of it, they waited about two months before they came by to arrest me for felony possession. They surrounded my house, pulled guns on me; they thought I must be some big dealer because I lived in a nice place. I asked if they had a search warrant, they said they had an arrest warrant. They cuffed me and took my heroin stash from one pocket in my bathrobe and a bag of rock coke from the other and said, 'Congratulations, this is your second felony offense.'


"I was scared shitless. I had no criminal record. I got a six-month sentence, suspended, provided I didn't test dirty. I'd rather be dead than in jail. I got clean in December '97 after seven attempts at rehab, but it was fear of jail that finally saved my life."

GUREWITZ BOUNCED BACK WITH EVEN MORE DE-termination to continue signing and developing new talent. Nowadays, Epitaph is a burgeoning umbrella company of different special-genre imprints, each catering to a different market. In today's record industry, seeing a real music person still in the game is rare. Some industry observers have suggested Epitaph's recent eclectic forays into blues, reggae, ska, country, electronic and even African music make Gurewitz look like the punk-rock version of illustrious Island Records chief Chris Blackwell.

In the record business, many innovations are currently being pioneered, and when the dust settles it will become clearer that Epitaph was at the forefront of most of them, including master-recording-ownership issues, long-term artist contracts, MP3 and many other factors that will eventually change the rules. "Why would you want an artist on your label who's been hating your guts for 14 years?" says Gurewitz.

Recipe for Hate and Suffer have attained a couple of hundred thousand in sales apiece, and they still sell steadily, while *Stranger Than Fiction* remains the group's single biggest mover with Soundscan totals of sales of over 387,000. And Bad Religion is back on Epitaph. Nowadays, the Epitaph Bad Religion back catalog Soundscans about 65,000 a year, plus 720,380 sales from the four records for Atlantic.

"Punk rock is the most successful cellular musical virus after rap," says Gurewitz, "and its effects are so profound and far-reaching, it's irreversible — not just from the DIY ethic, but it helped to break down the barrier between artist and audience. Rock & roll definitely became a little more populist because of punk. We're never going back to the way it was."

"We're proud that Bad Religion was a part of that movement. Not bad for a garage band of teenagers from the Valley who used to ditch school to listen to the Germs." 

CD Review **BAD RELIGION** *THE PROCESS OF BELIEF* (Epitaph)

PRACTICALLY PERFECT PUNK EQUATIONS

BY JOHN PAYNE

NOT TO SOUND TOO PROG ABOUT IT, BUT within the tiny confines of the melodic punk genre they chiefly created, Bad Religion's new CD finds the band, yes, *subtly* stretching musical borders and further expanding on the style's required constituent parts. It's real professional stuff, you knew it would be, and it delivers just about 100 percent immediate gratification. Which is to say, no band on Earth has a sharper gift for giving the kids what they want while prodding them to open their ears a bit.

A classic B.R. set (uh, classic in the true-to-form sense) of mostly way-hyper trouncings through 14 righteous little rants, *The Process of Belief* benefits from our crusty veterans' wealth of hard-earned wisdom 'n' experience; these are almost too-perfect punk equations. That's "almost" because, while opener "Supersonic" sets the tone with a lotta standard-issue amphetamine bounce and sweaty forward propulsion, etc., with Greg Graffin punching out "I want life — it's exciting!" and the band really making you feel that, if you're *listening* (entirely possible with these songs) you're gonna pick up on a few new items tossed into the pot. The supersocko drumming — that locomotive pogo/slam speed-bump realized and refined right here in sunny Southern California — hashed over throughout by Brooks Wackerman is totally, totally, totally excellent, so wicked that B.R. indeed decided to go with identical beats for about 80 percent of the rekkid. But this is hardcore, so that's not a knock, just to mention that the form has become something a tad holy — you can't deviate so much that you're gonna come off too arty or technical; why, the kids'd think you were pretentious, a wanker!

So what B.R. brings are ways to magnify the hardcore form's musical content while displaying some truly supreme economy (ain't one wasted note on the entire damn album). Especially on the electric "ballad" (faster, though) "Broken," the initially reggaefied "Sorrow" and the Tull-ish (no kiddin') "Epiphany" you get tasty doses of what this band is never credited with, which is smart vocal harmonies and shrewd and surprising and mood-enhancing chord shifts; credit Brett Gurewitz and Graffin for actually knowing how to construct musically logical bridges and choruses. And Graffin, not often cited for it, has real vocal skills, with a pleasing register/grain and seemingly uninfected by overt Valley duderino. If you're not farsighted yet, check out Graffin's lyrics in the confusingly elaborate CD booklet. You will maybe discover that he's got a fine way of preaching without coming off too stridently correct about things, even putting out a rather avuncular vibe in his diatribes.

Bad Religion is about feeling helpless ("Destined for Nothing": "No destiny for you and me" — no few-chaah) or cheated and boiling, but picking yourself up and doing something, anything, about it. Whether or not the band is, y'know, too *old* to be carrying on like this is moot when evidently zillions of kids don't have a problem with that. More interesting is how many of these extremely well-crafted new tunes would hold up well in different musical settings. For Gurewitz and Graffin, there'll be plenty of life after hardcore. 