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BAD RELIGION

20
YEARS
OF
KEEPING
THE
FAITH



By Alan Sculley

The New America,

the new album by Bad Religion, arrives on the band's 20th anniversary, a milestone that establishes Bad Religion as the most enduring punk band going.

So it's fitting that the new CD will stand out as a special event for the band — and particularly for singer and chief songwriter Greg Graffin. For the album, the band, which also includes guitarists Greg Hetson and Brian Baker, bassist Jay Bentley and drummer Bobby Schayer, nabbed pop legend Todd Rundgren as producer. This pairing was a dream-come-true type event for Graffin, who had been a lifelong Rundgren fan.

"When I was a kid, the next door neighbor was always playing Todd Rundgren music as a teen-ager. I was nine years old," Graffin said. "And I think I got my first Todd record when I was nine years old. He put a major stamp on my life," Graffin said. "And finally coming to work with him after 20 some years of me being aware of him, and after 20 years of history in the band, that's an occasion in itself to celebrate. There's a story in that, this kid growing up feeling like an outsider who found solace in Todd Rundgren finally getting a chance to work with him."

Ironically, the first steps toward bringing Rundgren aboard for the project happened without Graffin's knowledge.

"As I started doing some of the demos for this new record, my manager, unbeknownst to me, had sent the tapes to his (Rundgren's) manager," Graffin said. "So it got back to me that Todd liked them. When I heard that, I thought maybe Todd

could actually produce. As I wrote more, he started getting more of the demos. Now it was known to me. And then eventually, I'd say about a third of the way into the writing process, we talked with each other on the phone and I started to build confidence that he was serious (about working with the band). It was a process of discussions and ultimately I knew he would help this record."

Although Rundgren obviously played a role in creating the sound of *The New America*, his stamp on the sonic side of the production is rather subtle. For instance, the bass-less guitar-and-drum-only backing behind Graffin's vocals on the second verse of "It's A Long Way To The Promised Land" and the unusual drum track that opens "A World Without Melody" represent clever twists in the basic sound the group has crafted over the course of 17 releases. Otherwise, *The New America*, both sonically and stylistically, sounds very much like other recent Bad Religion albums such as *Stranger Than Fiction* (1994), *The Gray Race* (1996) and *No Substance* (1998).

That means the CD features catchy, hard driving tunes like "You've Got A Chance" that are built around the crisp, melodic vocal lines of Graffin, the anthemic vocal harmonies of other band members and the sharp guitar lines of Hetson and Baker. Where Graffin feels Rundgren had the biggest impact was on the lyrical personality of *The New America*. From the outset, Bad Religion's songs have had a strong topical slant. That hasn't changed with the new CD. But Graffin feels Rundgren helped

him bring a dimension to his lyrics that hadn't always been part of his writing on past albums.

"I think I've always been emotional, I've always been passionate about the topics I sing about, that I write about," Graffin said. "What Todd helped me to do was to feel more comfortable being emotional about my personal life. And he helped me reiterate and refocus my emotional opinionated nature, be able to work that into my

songs. I think that does come through in this album.

"I always appreciated his ability to be emotional and still be a hero," Graffin said of Rundgren. "I think that confidence, working with him, I knew he wouldn't let me do something if it was too sappy or too overly sentimental. Ultimately the way I exercise my emotion was by tackling social issues that showed how much I cared about society. But I wanted to show that I also can care about individuals as well."

So while Graffin might be showing a more personal side, he hasn't lapsed into writing sappy love ballads. But songs like "1000 Memories" and "Whisper In Time" do find Graffin turning his thoughts more inward. Graffin first spoke of "Whisper In Time," a song where he reflects on the little moments that give life meaning as the years pass. He concludes that each person is a messenger of memory.

"I share a philosophy of my own at the end of the song," he said. "I'm sharing a part of myself that I haven't shared before, my philosophy on the importance of the self. A song like '1000 Memories' talks about loss. It also talks about carrying that loss with us for the rest of our lives. If you lose a person in time, you also carry a part of him with you."

Still, *The New America* is largely a topical work. Frequently it presses a message that will be familiar to Bad Religion fans — the idea of thinking for yourself and seizing the opportunity to play a part in changing the world for the better.

The message grows even more emphatic on the title track, as Graffin urges people to recognize and learn from the mistakes of the past and band together to create a better America. "I'm just a voice among the throng who want a brighter destiny/We are the new America," Graffin sings as the song reaches its motivational climax.

But Graffin feels even a song like this offers a subtle shift toward a more personal perspective.

"Even a song like 'New America' is a song that is deeply personal," he said. "It talks about my experience and my hopes for the future. It's not full of sappy, sentimental romance, but it's definitely passionate. I guess it's typical of Bad Religion to be passionate."

One other typically passionate moment on the album is "Believe It," an anthem devoted to the right-minded outcasts of the world. That tune represents another event that helped make *The New America* a special for the group.

The song is the first collaboration since 1994 between Graffin and Brett Gurewitz, the guitarist who helped found Bad Religion and shared songwriting duties with Graffin through the *Stranger Than Fiction* album.

Gurewitz left the band to devote his energies to running the record label he started with the band, Epitaph Records, which at the time was expanding quickly behind the breakthrough success of The Offspring. Epitaph had also been Bad Religion's label until 1993, when the group signed with Atlantic Records. Gurewitz's departure was not entirely amicable, but Graffin hopes "Believe It" will be the start of further collaborations with Gurewitz.

"We actually had been in touch a lot," Graffin said. "He and I never had the kind of acrimony that some of the other band members had with him and he, of course, had with them. So he and I had been in touch all throughout. And he was going through various periods in his life, some difficult, where I was distant. Then we would be in touch more when his life was going better. So recently his life's been going really well and he felt like being creative again. And I said 'Man it would be great if we could do some music together.' It's something I think we're going to continue."