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BAD RELIGION

#46

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bad religion

by myk



*I have been a Bad Religion fan for as long as I've liked Punk, but when I first started listening to them they were sort of on hiatus. They had much more important things to do and didn't tour much, so I never got much of a chance to meet them. When I was asked to interview vocalist Greg Graffin I jumped at the chance. It wasn't under the best conditions, but unlike Rancid it was a solo interview. I found Greg to be insightful and very highly educated, but I have to admit, at times a little long winded. He likes to get his points across. I also have to admit that after the interview, I had to ask what some of the concepts he was taking about were. But that's what you get for interviewing a college professor, and someone in the punk scene for some 20 years. Bad Religion's latest album is on Atlantic and is titled **No Substance**. Thanks to Bobbi at Atlantic for setting me up and getting me and Laurie in the show. Lastly thank to Laurie again for the great pictures. -Myk*

Under the Volcano: To start off I wanted you to know that one of your good friends is on our staff, Big Vinny Segarra.

Greg Graffin: Ah, Big Vinny. There are days on tour when one day blends into the next and you don't really know what city you're in, but you always know when you're in New York because Vinny will be there, and New York is the only place where people are named Vinny.

UTV: Well, I guess I start with a sort of non-Bad

Religion question. Why after all these years did you decide to do a solo record?

Greg Graffin: I'm kind of at that phase in my career where I want to do things that are kind of carefree and without regard to marketability.

UTV: So recording stuff not under the Bad Religion banner gives you a lot more freedom?

Greg Graffin: Pure creativity, and some people might think it's not good, but actually I've been quite surprised by the great response I've had from so many of the people that have bought it. It's the most honest thing that's come out of Bad Religion in some time.

UTV: Considering that any initial interest in it was from Bad Religion fans, have you seen any interest building from non-Bad Religion fans?

Greg Graffin: Well, not yet, but I wouldn't hear from them I don't think. That would be a harder thing to gauge, whether they know Bad Religion or not. We just assume they all do. Someday maybe it'll have it's own life.

UTV: Is there a sort of market you're aiming for with that music?

Greg Graffin: NO! No, not at all. In fact, I might do another album that would be totally different but it will still be called *American Legion*. So *American Legion* is just a name that I put on any of my free form creativity, because when you are in America, if you step outside the norm of what people expect from you, you are seen as a legion, or a sore. That's why I called it *American Legion*. It wouldn't be marketable as Bad Religion and it's definitely outside the norm of what people would expect. Hopefully I can continue that tradition.

UTV: Some of the people that work with us, and some of the readers have bands; what have you found to be the qualities that have led to such a long and prosperous career?

Greg Graffin: I think doing it as a hobby helps a lot. Not getting too absorbed by it. In other words, don't commit your life to it because there is so much more to life than music. Music is a part of human behavior and if all you do is get absorbed in your music industry, you're going to be pretty miserable.

UTV: Speaking of the music industry, now you guys are on Atlantic, you spent a good solid chunk of your career on Epitaph. What have you seen as the differences between being on what they call an indie as opposed to a major?

Greg Graffin: All I saw, quite frankly, was what I expected. Maybe it's called a bit of wishful blindness. I wanted better distribution and I got it. A more concerted press profile.

UTV: Have you seen bigger venues? Are you playing bigger places?

Greg Graffin: No. That's a fallacy. A major label really has nothing to do with promotion, the live arena. They don't bring people to the venues, only a live tradition does. That has been intact since our beginning. Really, all I've seen is that when I go to a weird town in America, and I got to the local record store, they have my record. That makes me feel so good, 'cause in the early days when we'd go on tour

we'd feel really lonesome out there when we'd show up in a decent sized city like Cleveland or Detroit and there wouldn't be any of your records there.

UTV: Tell me about the Bad Religion scholarship award that was recently given out.

Greg Graffin: Well, this is a fund that we hope we can continue every year; we're starting the next one in October. It's just money that we made available because we've spent our whole career challenging



the currently held values and essentially that is what the scientists do also... well, good scientists do that. We wanted to put a little of our money where our mouth is and try to get involved in motivating people to question the prevailing values, and the best way to do it -- we hope -- was to give money to people who are interested in doing field work in the sciences.

UTV: I know you are well educated. Do you still work in education?

Greg Graffin: Well, I'm probably gonna get back into it in a couple of years, so you can expect Bad Religion to sort of evolve back to the way it was a few years ago.

UTV: So, you have gotten to the point where you are fully employed by Bad Religion?

Greg Graffin: I'm not really employed... I own it.

UTV: Well, you 'own it', but it takes a controlling amount of time?

Greg Graffin: It takes up a lot of time, but it did when I was on an independent label as well.

UTV: I know you *did* have a full-time job at one point.

Greg Graffin: Two full-time jobs.

UTV: Late last year you did a very small club tour. How did that all come about? I know you played CB's, Coney Island and Wetlands in the city.

Greg Graffin: Well, we knew our next record we

were putting out was gonna be sort of more in the vein of the way we used to record. Kind of around the time *Suffer* came out, we released a record that was real authentic, that was pure, without regard to the marketability, and we wanted to do the same thing with this album. Part of the tradition of those older days was to play small venues where people were packed to the walls and couldn't breathe, and it was in their face. So we wanted to do a test drive to see if we could actually do a tour like that, and we did those three dates in New York City to test it out, 'cause it was close to where we were recording.

UTV: I know you guys did different sets each night. How did you decide which of the old stuff to pull out?

Greg Graffin: It's always hard. I mean, we have a hundred and sixty something songs, you just sort of think back to the old days, which songs went over well and which ones didn't.

UTV: Brian Baker for a second... Originally the word was -- I don't know if this is true -- but originally the word was he was a fill in member until you decided what you were going to do after Brett left. Now he definitely seems to be a full-time member. Is he in fact a full member, and do some of your catalogue songs not get played because he doesn't know them?

Greg Graffin: Yeah, he's a full member. Whether or not we want to play the catalogue depends on how good we can play those catalogue songs. He can play anything, but whether or not the song will go over well is a big concern.

UTV: How is he adapted to your style of writing, Bad Religion's writing process?

Greg Graffin: I think he's adapted well. He makes contributions when he can, if he thinks of a good riff or something. That's all we can ask for, someone who is creative and very able bodied.

UTV: When the new CD came out there was a limited number of free CDs given out at the retail level. Tell me about some of the songs on that disc.

Greg Graffin: Those were just weird tracks or outtakes, some tracks that never made it to albums. Songs that I think are good, obviously, 'cause I wrote most of them, but for whatever reason.... We're still a democracy, some songs don't make it. One of the songs is just a silly ramble, to show you what happens at two in the morning in the studio -- you go off on the deep end. Sometimes it's a nice glimpse into the recording process. That's the last song, called "Follow The Leader," which is just a goofy song, an in quotations, "song."

UTV: I don't know if you're aware, there is a bootleg floating around. A 7" with a bunch of cover songs on there...

Greg Graffin: That's weird [chuckles] 'cause we never do cover songs. We've never played them live, except, literally maybe a handful of times. They must be from a sound check, where we goof around sometimes and do cover songs, but never live. It's very curious.

UTV: Aside from yourself, is anyone else in the band holding other jobs?

Greg Graffin: No.

UTV: Between the band and family, is there no time?

Greg Graffin: Some people don't want to. Some people go into music 'cause they don't want to work. I am just a really hyperactive guy and really want to make a contribution to society in whatever way I can. That means working at both ends of the candle.

UTV: Do you guys still have any kind of relationship with Brett?

Greg Graffin: A friendship, yeah. I talked to him. I just hope he can get better, get his life back in order before he can reach out and re-establish the ground that he forged. Don't forget, he's a leaving party. He left the band. That's really hard... I mean, you can't welcome someone back if they don't want to come

back. As a leaving party, there's so much you have to clear up in your own head, about why you left. About what you don't like. About the people you left. About why you take drastic steps. All those things have to be considered before you can begin to rectify the friendships.

UTV: Being in the band, and being a major player at the label, did you find, in retrospect, that that was a help or a hindrance?

Greg Graffin: Well, early on it was a help, later on it was a hindrance. It was a help early because you want to have the guy in the band motivated to sell the music. But, after it gets to a certain level of marketability then it becomes a hindrance because he has to focus too much on the marketing, and not enough on the pure creativity. I feel that's where the biggest conflict began, around the time for *Recipe For Hate*. By the time *Stranger Than Fiction* came out, he was hardly even talking to me. We hardly talked at all, or consulted each other on the song writing or the direction of the album 'cause he was so set in his ways on how he wanted the album to be marketed.

UTV: Did that have any effect on your taste on those particular couple of albums?

Greg Graffin: Definitely.

UTV: Do you feel they were not what they could've been?

Greg Graffin: Well, the albums were tremendously successful, and I'm proud of the writing I did on them. That's one thing, no matter what kind of turmoil is involved, no one can take the writing away from you. The writing was pure and creative, and I like what I did on it. But I remember the process of making them was not fun, and that can come through on the recording also.

UTV: You're on the road for the Warp tour, and there are forty some-odd bands playing. You've done numerous tours. Who are some of the bands that you have played with or seen, new and up coming bands, that have some kind of splash?

Greg Graffin: There aren't a lot of new and upcoming bands. I'm a big fan of Unwritten Law, I still think they are one of the best bands out here. Then it's the old stalwarts Bad Religion and NOFX, that the audience is getting real excited for. I'm proud of that, and it shows that it's a classic style that's not showing any signs of age.

UTV: Who are you listening to these days, if you have time?

Greg Graffin: It's not even a matter of time, unless I discover them live and we play with them I'm not really listening to anyone. I do a lot of writing, a lot of singing, a lot of playing in my own world. That keeps me pretty busy.

UTV: What sources influence you most? Newspapers, TV, Radio?

Greg Graffin: A little bit of all that, but also just interaction with people. Being social, that is the most important thing a songwriter can do. Very few songwriters prosper by being recluses.

UTV: What authors, non-music, do you find to be effective?

Greg Graffin: I read almost exclusively non-fiction.... I've also read some Nabokov lately, it was exquisite. But, Neal Wilson and Carl Sagan, mostly.

UTV: So science still has a hold for you?

Greg Graffin: Oh yeah. It's the only way to be. Empiricism the only way for me. ☺

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