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INTERVIEW:

## BAD RELIGION

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**INTERVIEW:**

# BAD RELIGION

It's a rare occurrence when a rock band stays together continuously for 30 years or more, but it's even more uncommon for a punk rock band to last that long. Bad Religion is one of only a handful of exceptions that have defied the odds by continuously touring and issuing albums without ever breaking up or reuniting. Throughout the years they've remained faithful to their initial punk ideals even as their musical directions expanded and progressed.

"We've written 15 albums that we're proud of," says Bad Religion guitarist Brett Gurewitz. He sat down with bandmate Greg Graffin (vocals) to discuss his band's illustrious and unusual career with Nic Harcourt for an At Guitar Center podcast at the Hollywood Guitar Center store. "We've written hundreds and hundred of songs. We have a body of work that we're quite proud of and that has some gravity to it."

Bad Religion's lineup has remained surprisingly consistent since Graffin, Gurewitz, and bassist Jay Bentley formed the band in 1980, although Gurewitz and Bentley have taken brief hiatuses and various drummers have come and gone. Guitarist

Greg Hetson has stayed with the band continuously since joining in 1984, as has guitarist Brian Baker, who became a member in 1994.

"We formed Bad Religion at the beginning of what I would call L.A. hardcore," says Graffin. "It was a transitional time. The '77 style of art school punk rock was happening in L.A. and New York, which had a sort of a French post-modernist philosophy behind it. L.A. hardcore brought in a new kind of attitude from the suburbs and beaches. The old school punks thought we were hoodlums, and we thought that they were just artsy and not punks. We wore leather jackets. They wore leopard skin leotards."

As the core songwriters in the band, Graffin and Gurewitz fortuitously came to the realization that the music itself was more important than the ephemeral fashion- and trend-driven elements that drew some fans to the punk genre. "We wanted to cultivate songwriting," says Graffin. "The bands that we liked the most had great songs. We knew that if Bad Religion was going to have any impact in the L.A. punk scene it had to be based on our songs and not the way we looked or on any fashion innovations."

"We just tried to be punk," adds Gurewitz. "I was just learning to play guitar, and I wrote everything as fast and aggressively



BAD RELIGION AT GUITAR CENTER, HOLLYWOOD.

as I could. A lot of the hardcore bands that were formed during the second wave of L.A. punk were surfers and former jocks. They were tough guys. We were nerdy, smart kids who were outcasts.”

Gurewitz and Graffin put their brains to good use, however, to stand out from the crowd. Graffin mentions that astronomer Carl Sagan was as big an influence on him as bands like the Ramones and the music he heard on DJ Rodney Bingenheimer’s Rodney on the ROQ programs broadcast on Pasadena radio station KROQ. By combining the catchy pop sensibilities of the Ramones with intelligent, thought-provoking lyrics, Bad Religion managed to transcend the adolescent,

cartoonish, or violently aggressive music that many other hardcore bands from L.A. were producing at the time.

“I wanted to write songs that have something lasting to say, with a philosophical edge that got people thinking,” Graffin explains. “But I also wanted to write songs that people liked. I wanted people to leave the venue singing our songs. My voice was never going to be as attractive as a pop singer’s voice, but that’s what gave it the punk edge.”

“We were both seekers,” Gurewitz adds. “We were both inquisitive, skeptical, and very anti-establishment. When we named the band, Bad Religion was the best name we could think of at

the time. As the band has endured and evolved that name has served us well. It has given us lots of excellent grist for the songwriting mill, whereas a lot of our peers with band names like The Adolescents and Youth Brigade didn’t have much to go with when they turned 35 years old.”

To demonstrate that thought, Graffin describes how Bad Religion’s latest album, *Dissent of Man*, remains true to the initial ideals that motivated the band all along. “We’ve taken up the timeless debate between religion, science, and our modern culture,” he says. “We were lucky that when we were young we stumbled upon this idea of religion as a focal point for the topical matter in this band.



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—Greg Graffin, Bad Religion

That gave us a timeless, endless topic that is always relevant, especially to American society. The common thread in punk rock is an anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian attitude that forces people to be skeptical. You should always question the people who hold all the power. That's a valuable thing that all punkers share, yet in times of fundamentalist-style politics it's seen as a poison, even though I think it holds any enlightened society together."

"I've always thought of myself as delivering a message when I sing," he elaborates. "I feel like a lecturer who is saying that here is something that moves me passionately. Sharing sentiments is the same kind of thing I see in folk musicians from the early part of the 20th century, like Woody Guthrie. I've always felt that punk is a form of folk music, even though people have made fun of that idea. I've always gravitated towards that style of music."

One development that Graffin and Gurewitz feel has helped the punk genre thrive and survive during recent years is the affordability of home studio recording equipment. "The studio equipment that they sell nowadays makes high-quality recording possible for everyone," says Graffin. "If a kid wants to take his time and record something that sounds elaborate, he or she can do that in a bedroom. That's helped a lot with the creative end of making music. People can be more creative and involve anyone they want in their production. Then they can put it on the Internet and anyone can hear it."

"The Internet basically turned everything upside down," agrees Gurewitz, who formed the Epitaph record label initially to sell Bad Religion's music but turned the venture into a highly successful independent venture. "Some of my favorite records from the last 10 years were made by someone on a laptop, like the first Hot Chip records. They put their music online, and it spread virally and became popular. Then they got booked to play at the Coachella festival, so they put a band together and learned to play their record live. That turned

the whole process of playing live first and then getting a record deal around. People are now using the recording process as a songwriting tool instead of just as a means to capture their band's live performance. There are still bands coming up with guitars and drums that start out playing live, so it's not like the new is displacing the old."



When an artist signs to my label, I tell him 'Thanks for hiring me.'

—Brett Gurewitz, Bad Religion

As the owner of Epitaph Records, Gurewitz has considerable insight into how the Internet has affected the music business. Although many observers feel that Internet distribution has replaced the industry's previous practices of conducting business and has made traditional record labels obsolete, Gurewitz feels that record labels can still play a vital role in promoting and selling a band or artist's music to the masses.



Brooks Wackerman

"Major labels need to radically rethink their role," says Gurewitz. "Independent labels don't need to rethink their role as much because they've generally realized that their role is to provide service to an artist. When an artist signs to my label, I tell him 'Thanks for hiring me.' Most major labels treat artists as if they work for the label. At Epitaph we know that an artist can put their record on iTunes, but to do a really thorough job they have to hire a publicist, an expert in retail marketing, an expert in social media or new media marketing, an expert in radio promotion, and an expert in logistics if they want to sell a physical product. Before you know it you have a team of six people in addition to your booking agent and manager, and everyone needs to be coordinated."

Due to his commitments running Epitaph Records, Gurewitz rarely performs live with the band anymore although he's still involved with writing songs and producing the records. "My responsibilities in the band are minimal," he says.

"Brett has to run the label every day," adds Graffin. "We actually benefit more from the work he does with Epitaph. If Epitaph were to falter, so would the band. We depend on the label a lot."

But Gurewitz's role as a songwriter is much bigger than his previous comment suggests.



Brian Barker

He says that one of his secrets for writing songs is buying a new guitar: "I judge guitars by how many new songs they have in them. When I get a new guitar, I usually get a new song out of it right away as soon as I get home, and sometimes I'll even get two or three new songs just like that. Each guitar feels and sounds a little different than the other ones, so it makes me play a little bit differently, which leads to me coming up with new songs. Each guitar is like a new friend or a new writing partner."

Graffin, who likes to write songs on acoustic guitar, agrees with Gurewitz: "I wrote some of our early songs on a cheap Sears acoustic guitar. It has its own sound that happens to be very cool. When I got my first Martin acoustic I think my songs improved or at least it felt like they did. A good sounding guitar helps you write better songs. I've always gravitated towards Gibsons and Fender folk guitars with old-timey sounds that remind me of radio sounds from the 1930s. It mixes so well with my voice. If you can strip a song down to a simple melody line that you can play on an acoustic piano or acoustic guitar and it still sounds good, you have a good song."

Although punk rock has changed significantly since Bad Religion released its first album, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, in 1982, both Graffin and Gurewitz are not disillusioned purists who



Jay Bentley

wish today's bands and music were still like they were in late '70s and '80s.

"Some of my favorite punk bands ever are relatively new bands," says Gurewitz. "There's still a lot of vitality in the punk genre. I've often thought about what musical genres mean. When a new genre crops up and becomes chic and fashionable, eventually it crests and starts to wane but it never goes away. There are still rockabilly, ska, and goth bands. Metal is perennial, but now you have more sub-genres of metal than you could ever imagine."

"I'm very proud of the punk rock genre regardless of what state it's in," he concludes. "I think punk was the most prolific genre of music ever. Almost all of the sub-genres of rock that we have today have punk rock as their common ancestor on rock's big bushy family tree. That's a movement that I'm part of and that I helped foment right down near the trunk, and that makes me feel very proud."

Download the latest episode of Guitar Center's podcast featuring Bad Religion on iTunes, Zune and [atguitarcenter.com/podcast](http://atguitarcenter.com/podcast)



Check out Bad Religion's new album *The Dissent of Man*, now available on iTunes.