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EXCLUSIVE BAD RELIGION TRIBUTE (page 70) & THE 15-SONG SOUNDTRACK TO THIS ISSUE (page 10)

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Why Is America's Reigning Rock Band Catching So Much Shit

By Steve Kandell Photographs by Dan Martensen

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CROWD CONTROL
Dave Smalley of
Down by Law meets
some fans, 1995.



Against the Grain

*The Oral
History of*
**Epitaph
Records**

The original Los Angeles punk rock scene lived fast, died young, and left behind hair metal. Meanwhile, Bad Religion guitarist Brett Gurewitz started Epitaph Records in a closet in the back of his recording studio, eventually sending punk up the pop charts and everyone from the majors to Madonna scurrying for a piece. But keeping the scene—and himself—together during the chaos proved nearly impossible. For the first time ever, the people behind the explosion—and implosion—celebrate 30 years of dragging punk kicking and screaming into the mainstream.

By **JASON BUHRMESTER**

Auteursrechtelijk beschermd materiaal

Four teenagers from El Camino Real High School in Woodland Hills, California, *Bad Religion* play their first show in 1980, opening for *Social Distortion* at a warehouse party.

BRETT GUREWITZ (guitarist, *Bad Religion*): We only had about eight songs, and most of them were, like, a minute long, so we probably played for about 15 minutes.

JAY BENTLEY (bassist, *Bad Religion*): I remember throwing up and thinking I was so nervous that I was going to pee my pants.

JENNIFER FINCH (bassist, *L7*): I thought they sucked. And I felt like they were coming late to the scene. There were already Circle Jerks and Fear and these stronger, local acts. They were kids from the Valley up against these more hardcore, punk rock guys. Those bands really had a violent edge to them, while *Bad Religion* had this goofy and melodic feel.

EDWARD COLVER (photographer): A lot of that stuff just sort of evolved out of the muck: "We got a band together, we're playing next week!" The scene back then was a collection of about 200 misfits.

BENTLEY: Watching bands like the Adolescents do three-part harmonies was a big push for us. We would watch them with jaws to the ground thinking that's what we wanted to do.

GREG GRAFFIN (singer, *Bad Religion*): Society shunned punk because they didn't think we had anything to offer. So from the earliest get-go, I was interested in writing songs that had some substance to them, not something just to slamdance to.

Bad Religion record a self-titled EP in '81. Gurewitz borrows \$1,000 from his father to press it, and Epitaph Records, named after the King Crimson lyric "Confusion will be my epitaph," is born. Their debut album, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, followed the next year. Loaded with articulate songs about the separation of church and state and nuclear war, it reveals songwriters Gurewitz and Graffin were smarter than the average punk.

GUREWITZ: I wasn't a good student and I was kind of a loser in high school. But my parents encouraged me to take a shot at making some records and selling them.

BENTLEY: We all were shocked at the number of records we sold. I think

it was 10,000 copies. So I started going, "Where's the money?" It came to light that Brett had a serious drug problem, and the money was gone.

Drugs and violence rapidly destroy the punk scene, and by '83 most L.A. venues refuse to book punk bands. The LAPD finish off what is left of the scene.

FINCH: In '84 in Los Angeles, you had the Olympics. A lot of the SWAT team's practice for the Olympics' public control was done on punk rock shows. They were showing up in full riot gear. We suddenly had helicopters here. A lot of ordinances regarding curfews and things went down.

With nowhere to perform, Bad Religion stall while writing their second album. The resulting record, Into the Unknown, is a keyboard-driven, proggy mess the band has all but disowned. Gurewitz leaves Bad Religion to attend recording school. He opens Westbeach Recorders and begins producing and releasing bands on Epitaph, including L7 and Little Kings, a local punk band featuring guitarist and future Pirates of the Caribbean director Gore Verbinski.

VERBINSKI: Brett had this house on Hollywood Boulevard. We'd play there and drink in an alley across a street covered with glass from smashed-out cars. Brett's model, which is great, is to make a record that doesn't cost any money and then get in a van and tour. I was starting to direct and it was taking off, and I wasn't going to jump in a van. We had this record and there was no band, so that was a disaster.

FINCH: Brett was great to hang out with. A real oddball character. He has a lot of different interests, speaks really fast, and is very energetic. He's entertaining and on top of the social group. I think psychiatrists call it narcissism.

Graffin, now enrolled in the geology program at UCLA, keeps the Bad Religion name alive through sporadic performances with Greg Hetson from the Circle Jerks on guitar and a revolving roster of bassists and drummers. By '87, Gurewitz, Bentley, and drummer Pete Finestone rejoin Graffin and Hetson. Released in '88, Suffer was a cynical blast at the conservatism of '80s America. More important, the tempo and tone redefined Southern California punk, and Gurewitz's increasing skills behind the console meant the band—and SoCal punk—suddenly had a proper producer, even if they weren't sure there was an audience.



OLD-TIME RELIGION
Greg Graffin and Greg
Hetsen in the early
'80s; European tickets
(right); Brett Gurewitz
in Amsterdam, 1990



OPENING SPREAD: LISA JOHNSON. THIS PAGE: COURTESY EPITAPH (3)

FLETCHER DRAGGE (guitarist, *Pennywise*): *Suffer* single-handedly restarted the movement. It's definitely one of the greatest punk records ever written. Not to mention that it inspired so many bands to get back into the scene.

DEXTER HOLLAND (singer-guitarist, *the Offspring*): We were hanging out with the Operation Ivy guys—who ended up becoming Rancid—and they were listening to that record a lot. It stood out because it had a lot of melody to it.

TIM ARMSTRONG (singer-guitarist, *Rancid*): It was the best sounding punk record I'd ever heard.

LARS FREDERIKSEN (singer-guitarist, *Rancid*): *Suffer* came out, and it never left the turntable for the whole summer.

DAVE SMALLEY (singer-guitarist, *Down by Law*): One of my favorite groups in the world to this day is Chicago. They have these beautiful harmonies. [Bad Religion] were better than Chicago, and they were a punk band.

FAT MIKE (singer-bassist, *NOFX*): I remember thinking this is the punk rock I used to love when I was a kid. Southern California melodic hardcore! We should be playing more like this.

JIM LINDBERG (former singer, *Pennywise*): All of a sudden we went from an off-the-hinge beach-punk band to sounding very similar to Bad Religion.

Encouraged by the success of Suffer and excited about the resurgence of California punk, Gurewitz rededicates himself to Epitaph, producing and releasing albums by NOFX, Down by Law, and Pennywise. Gurewitz also signs the Offspring and Rancid.

GUREWITZ: We had a good little thing going. It was organic and real. It was growing.

FAT MIKE: NOFX were the first band on Epitaph when it started up for real. I worked there during Easter vacation—I was shipping 100 copies of [Bad Religion's] *No Control*, 100 copies of *Suffer*, and five copies of our album.

VERBINSKI: I directed the video for [NOFX's] "S&M Airlines." We went to LAX and hopped a fence and filmed a bunch of airplanes. I never shot green-screen before, so we found a green wall and shot the band. It was half painted green and our paint didn't match. It was just scrappy.

JEFF ABARTA (first Epitaph employee): Around February '91, Brett finally said, "Okay, come in for an interview." It was very weird. I worked at

Sav-On drugstore at the time, and we wore ties. So I showed up with my tie on. Fat Mike answered the door and was like, "Who is this yahoo?"

DRAGGE: Everyone wanted to be on Epitaph or sound like Epitaph. I remember Brett telling us he wanted to be the Dischord of the West Coast.

SMALLEY: The bands all liked each other. We all sang on each other's records or produced each other's records or hung out while they were recording and went to each other's shows.

FAT MIKE: I finished real estate school after NOFX went to Europe. I never sold anything. Right after that, we put out *Ribbed*, which was in '91. I made \$8,000 that year and thought, "Shit, I can live off this."

HOLLAND: I remember sitting down with Brett, and he said, "I think you guys could be a big band. I don't mean Nirvana big. But kind of big."

LINDBERG: Brett had a perfect ear for what he wanted and which bands would fit the label. We would have these Epitaph nights at the [Hollywood] Palladium after our second record came out. It was all the bands you wanted to see, and they all happened to be on the same label.

GUREWITZ: The first Rancid record sold 30,000 right away. Punk was huge, and the media didn't even know it. We got to the point in the late '80s and early '90s where Epitaph was selling a million records a year, and yet no one knew we existed except the kids buying the records.

BENTLEY: One day [E Street Band keyboardist] Roy Bittan called and made an appointment at Epitaph. Brett and I sat and talked with him, and he laid out this whole plan that [Bad Religion's 1990 album] *Against the Grain* could be a great record if we just re-recorded it and rewrote everything under his production. It was a monumental insult to three people who were working at a warehouse pushing out 100,000 units by hand and really had a lot of pride in their work. [Bittan's publicist did not respond to requests for comment.]

GUREWITZ: To the rest of the world, we were like Civil War reenactors. "You guys are still doing punk shows? How cute."

LINDBERG: It wasn't until the surfers and skaters started putting our bands into their videos that this spread beyond Southern California. We went on our first European tour and our first Australian tour, and we had 1,000 people coming to our shows. They all talked about the videos.

HOLLAND: I guess no one put it together—all the kids that liked to skate and surf would love bands like Pennywise. It took, like, six to nine months



MORE AMERICAN GRAFFITI
Rancid's Lars Frederiksen, Brett Reed, Tim Armstrong, and Matt Freeman in New York City, 1999



to sink in, and all of a sudden all these orders start coming in. We were recording *Smash* at the time, and you could see it growing every week.

GRAFFIN: I had legitimate concerns with Epitaph focusing on us. Brett was already divided. I met with people from Atlantic who said, "No, we'll focus on you." What did I know?

GUREWITZ: One night I was driving home and didn't want to go in the house because I didn't want to stop listening to [the *Smash* mixes]. I started circling the block listening to the record over and over on ten in my old Volvo station wagon. My wife greeted me at the door, and I said, "Honey, we're gonna be rich."

GREG HETSON (guitarist, *Bad Religion*): I don't think Brett had the resources to sell more records or to even produce the demand that was coming. About ten seconds after we signed [Bad Religion's] deal [with Atlantic], the Offspring blew up.

DRAGGE: I don't know how many weeks later I was sitting in a Japanese restaurant and "Come Out and Play" came on, and everyone started playing along with chopsticks on their fucking glasses. I thought, "What the fuck is going on here?"

GUREWITZ: Over the course of a couple weeks, everything changed.

Thanks to massive singles "Come Out and Play" and "Self Esteem," the Offspring's Smash, released April 8, 1994, goes on to sell more than 11 million copies worldwide and become the most successful independent album of all time.

ABARTA: I can't even remember how many hours we were working at the time. We might have had ten employees. Ten employees to ship that many records is pretty astounding.

GUREWITZ: We had Offspring CDs stacked 30 feet high to the ceiling, covering every square inch of our warehouse. It was like a giant Rubik's Cube. There was no negative space.

DRAGGE: All the major labels approached Brett and told him he was going to need help with it and said he couldn't do it on his own. They wanted to buy the record or partner up with him. Brett said no. He took out a mortgage on his house just to get records printed.

GUREWITZ: I thought I could handle it. I was comparing myself to hip-hop labels that had big hits. N.W.A had just sold a million records, y'know? It's

harder to sell 50,000 than to sell a million. Once those things start selling, you don't even have to do anything, they just start sucking out of the pressing plant like a wind. While the guys and I are quarreling and getting on each other's nerves [during the making of 1994's *Stranger Than Fiction*], I'm a multimillionaire overnight. And I'm like, "I'm 32 years old and I just wrote my best record. The universe is telling me that this is a good time to exit."

GRAFFIN: And at the time I didn't understand why he was doing it. But I just had to focus on the band and keeping it going. In retrospect, it had to happen, but at the time I felt really deserted.

GUREWITZ: Jay and I got in a big fight, and it ended in something along the lines of "Oh, yeah? Fuck you. I quit." I think that's a fair paraphrasing of what happened.

Brian Baker, formerly of Minor Threat, turns down an offer to be R.E.M.'s touring guitarist to join Bad Religion. Rancid's Let's Go and NOFX's Punk in Drublic go gold, leading both bands to field major label offers.

FAT MIKE: I always thought we were way better than the Offspring. They had just come off a European tour opening for us when they broke, and no one even liked them—their songs were derivative of old punk hits. Then I realized it's because they rock. They're a rocking band. They're just not great songwriters like Bad Religion or Rancid. Sure I was totally jealous, the whole band was. That was the battle we fought with ourselves.

"Anyone who knows Brett knows that he doesn't tread lightly. When he does something, he does it, whether it's Epitaph or Bad Religion or crack cocaine."

Pennywise's Fletcher Dragge

COURTESY EPITAPH

GUREWITZ: There were people who wanted to give me \$50 million for half my business. I already had more money than I ever thought I'd have, so I didn't need more money. I thought that if I sold my business, that would be the end of it.

HOLLAND: If your company is worth, I don't know what the numbers are, I've heard \$50 million, and if \$40 million of it is due to our record, then we felt like we should've been included in the discussion. There was a point where someone at Epitaph wanted to put a clause in the contract saying they could take out a life-insurance policy on me, so if I died, they'd be okay. Their investment would be okay. When it got to that point, it was like, "Wow, we're definitely not in the same place where everybody used to be." It's not about having fun and saying "Fuck the system" anymore.

DRAGGE: Brett was in tears over this, heartbroken. We were archenemies, or at least I was, with the Offspring. They started talking in the press about Epitaph. That was my house. If you're gonna talk shit, you're gonna deal with me. A line was drawn in the sand.

HOLLAND: Fletcher is a very loyal guy. We get along well now, actually, and we did before, but there was just a weird period of time where he would come to a show and pay some guy to throw a pitcher of beer on me onstage.

After the Offspring sign to Columbia, Gurewitz scrambles to hold on to the rest of his bands. Madonna attends Rancid shows in an attempt to lure the band to her Maverick label, even reportedly sending them a nude photo with a copy of her latest album. Despite her efforts, Rancid decide to sign with Epic, but an 11th hour plea from Gurewitz convinces them to stay with Epitaph and release ...And Out Come the Wolves, which eventually sells a million copies.

GUREWITZ: [The Epic executive] dyed his hair blue to celebrate that Rancid were going to sign that day. You know, to show, like, how punk he was. That had to feel weird coming into the office the next day with your hair blue and Rancid still signed to Epitaph.

FREDERIKSEN: We were these kids from the street, and all we ever wanted to do was play punk rock with our friends, which is exactly what we were doing, and then the wolves came out. But at the end of the day, the experience we had with Brett made us stay with Epitaph. We trusted Brett.

"There was a weird period of time when Fletcher would come to a show and pay a guy to throw a pitcher of beer on me onstage."

The Offspring's Dexter Holland

ARMSTRONG: It was the smartest thing we ever did.

FAT MIKE: I saw Offspring and Rancid all over MTV and Rancid on the cover of SPIN, and I thought, "I do not want to be that." I don't want to be another commercial punk band. I never want to try to be huge.

LINDBERG: We felt a real loyalty to Brett for plucking us out of obscurity and giving us this great life.

FAT MIKE: We renegotiated and got the most insane deal ever—just crazy money and royalties. Brett's lawyer said, "What are you doing? This is insane." Brett said, "I want to keep NOFX on my label." I found out later he was totally on heroin.

DRAGGE: There's nothing like a guy with millions of dollars in the bank when it comes to partying. And anyone who knows Brett knows that he doesn't tread lightly. When he does something, he does it, whether it's Epitaph or Bad Religion or crack cocaine.

ABARTA: We'd just mastered a new Down by Law record. We had this one room set up for listening with big-ass speakers; we were cranking it. And Brett was on the couch nodding. I was embarrassed for Dave [Smalley] because this was his new record, his baby, and Brett couldn't even stay awake to listen to it.

ARMSTRONG: He was good at hiding it initially, but then he wasn't. I was at his house, and he smoked crack right in front of me.

DRAGGE: He had an 80-inch screen, and he's got heroin in one hand and crack in the other, and he's sitting next to his dealer watching *Scarface* in this house in the Hollywood Hills. If you're gonna do it, this is how you do it.

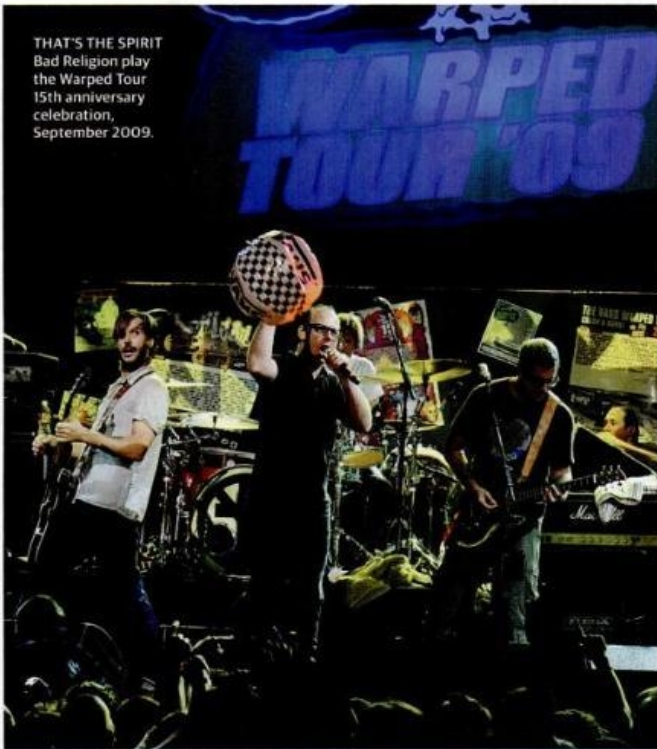


JUST SAY NO NOFX in Los Angeles, 2001: covers Fat Mike doesn't care for (right)



LISA JOHNSON

THAT'S THE SPIRIT
Bad Religion play
the Warped Tour
15th anniversary
celebration,
September 2009.



GUREWITZ: I just lost my way. I lost track of my values and wandered off my path in life. And being a drug addict already, I just did what came naturally.

DRAGGE: I actually drove Brett to rehab one time, but he insisted that he bring his dealer with him. They break out the crack pipe and start rocking it up. I'm not talking a hit or two—they were like nine hits deep. I was getting a contact high. The whole car is filled with rock smoke, and I couldn't see, so I missed the exit. So I turn around, and they're happy because they get more time to smoke rock. I'm in the fast lane doing 75, and they're cranking "I Fought the Law" by the Clash so fucking loud. I was the crack taxi driver.

In 1997, Gurewitz overdoses at home and is arrested for felony possession. After seven previous rehab attempts, he avoids a prison sentence by agreeing to check into the Impact Drug and Alcohol Treatment Center in Pasadena.

JOHN ALBERT (drummer, Bad Religion, 1985–86): I had gone to Impact to visit someone, and I hear somebody call my name. I look over and there's this tall guy with this huge drooping gunfighter mustache, and I'm thinking, "Who is this?" Brett thought he would have to go back to jail any moment, so it was like a jail mustache.

ARMSTRONG: I brought in about 40 songs. He went through the 40 songs and picked them. He pretty much sequenced *Life Won't Wait* from rehab.

GRAFFIN: I called him when he was in jail and told him about our gold record [for *Stranger Than Fiction*], and it made him happy. He was so appreciative of the phone call that it made me realize my own importance in his life.

LINDBERG: In 1996, I started to put together a tour with ourselves, blink-182, Unwritten Law, Rancid, and Bad Religion. But Kevin Lyman and the guys who started Warped Tour wanted to have us all on that. Little did we know it would become a huge part of our lives. Those first few years, the main revolving cast of bands was Bad Religion, NOFX, Pennywise, and Rancid.

FAT MIKE: I was hella suspicious the first year. I thought it would be some stupid corporate gig. We ended up doing the next year, and it was super-fun—you're hanging with other bands all day, gambling, taking drugs, drinking, and BBQing, and you only have to play a half hour. It's genius if you're a band. I wouldn't want to go if I was a kid.

JOE PRINCIPE (bassist, Rise Against): Graffin said to [Rise Against singer] Tim [McIlrath], "Don't underestimate the power of the Warped Tour. That's the only way we're exposed to new fans, there's an incredibly young audience, and it's important for them to absorb what Bad Religion and Rise Against are singing about."

After NOFX's 2000 album, Pump Up the Valuum, Fat Mike moves his band to his own Fat Wreck Chords. Gurewitz gets clean by December '98 and returns to Epitaph having also just formed the street-punk offshoot label Hellcat with Armstrong. In 1999, he founds Anti-, which has released music from Neko Case, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and Grammy-winning albums from Tom Waits, Booker T. Jones, and Solomon Burke.

GUREWITZ: Anti- was extremely important from a standpoint of having my work be personally rewarding. Because I don't only listen to punk rock. I'm an older dude now. Anti- is an outlet for me to sign something other than the greasy kid stuff.

NEKO CASE: They let their employees bring their dogs to work. Very civilized. The thing that sets Brett apart from other label heads is that he actually does what he says he's going to do, which is honorable. He gets it—it's not like having to teach someone Latin before having a conversation. Their formula worked and I like the fact that they had such success and didn't sell to someone bigger.

Graffin completes his masters degree in geology at UCLA in 1990 and receives a PhD in zoology from Cornell for his dissertation "Monism, Atheism, and the Naturalist Worldview: Perspectives from Evolutionary Biology." Working around Graffin's academic schedule, Bad Religion release The Gray Race (1996) and No Substance (1998).

BENTLEY: Brett called me and said, "Do you remember the Ramones' 11th album?" "No." "Me either and I'm a huge Ramones fan. You guys need to make a great record."

GRAFFIN: We cowrote a song on [2000's] *New America*, and that was successful. So then it was easier after that point to suggest, "Hey, why don't we try doing that for a whole album?" And he was really excited about the opportunity and having Epitaph put out Bad Religion again.

In 2002, Epitaph releases Bad Religion's The Process of Belief, their first album since reuniting with Gurewitz. Graffin recently published his first book, Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science and Bad Religion in a World Without God. He lectures in life sciences and paleontology at UCLA but is currently on sabbatical as he works with Bad Religion, who released The Dissent of Man in September and still tour while Gurewitz remains in L.A.

GRAFFIN: I'm trying to motivate more punkers to go into medicine.

Rancid still record for Hellcat, while recent Epitaph signees include Weezer and Social Distortion.

RIVERS CUOMO (singer-guitarist, Weezer): Epitaph offered us an incredible deal, and we felt because Brett was somebody who really appreciated alternative rock, it would be a good match culturally. So far, it's been great.

SMALLEY: When the Epitaph explosion was happening, there was, like, a perfect time, the perfect moment, the perfect place: L.A., 1995, 1996, you couldn't ask for a better situation being a punk rock band.

HOLLAND: It did become difficult for a couple years after that until everything sorted itself out, but I look at it as a really special time. Something you don't see happening again. People actually did something they loved, and for a moment, everything kinda worked the way you would hope.

DRAGGE: I'm 40 years old and I'm still in the pit. The last time I saw Bad Religion at the House of Blues, I was in the pit, front and center. That's what punk rock is about and what Epitaph is about—doing what you want and not letting anyone tell you that you can't do it. And if they tell you that you can't do it, you try twice as hard. ☘