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"We've never tried to be media whores. Or Madonna."—Greg Hetson



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HOUSTON—Bad Religion have been on tour for seven months. In that time, they've zig-zagged across America and traversed Europe. Soon they'll be heading to Japan before winding up their jaunt in Hawaii. With just a month left on their sold-out world tour, the band is gathering in the lobby of the Stouffer Radisson hotel in Houston, Texas.

From the hotel's eighth floor, all you can see is high rises full of gleaming glass, sparkling in the brilliant sunshine. There are very few signs of civilization, save for the few cars cruising the freeway. Visually, it looks like a scene from a post-nuclear flick where someone wakes up one morning to discover they are one of the few to survive a devastating germ bomb. It's the Sunday before President's Day; the freeways are almost bare, and no one seems to be working. Bad Religion, however, *are* working. Holidays mean little, Sundays never mean a day of rest unless it's a night off. And tonight the band is playing an 800-seat club in the city called Numbers.

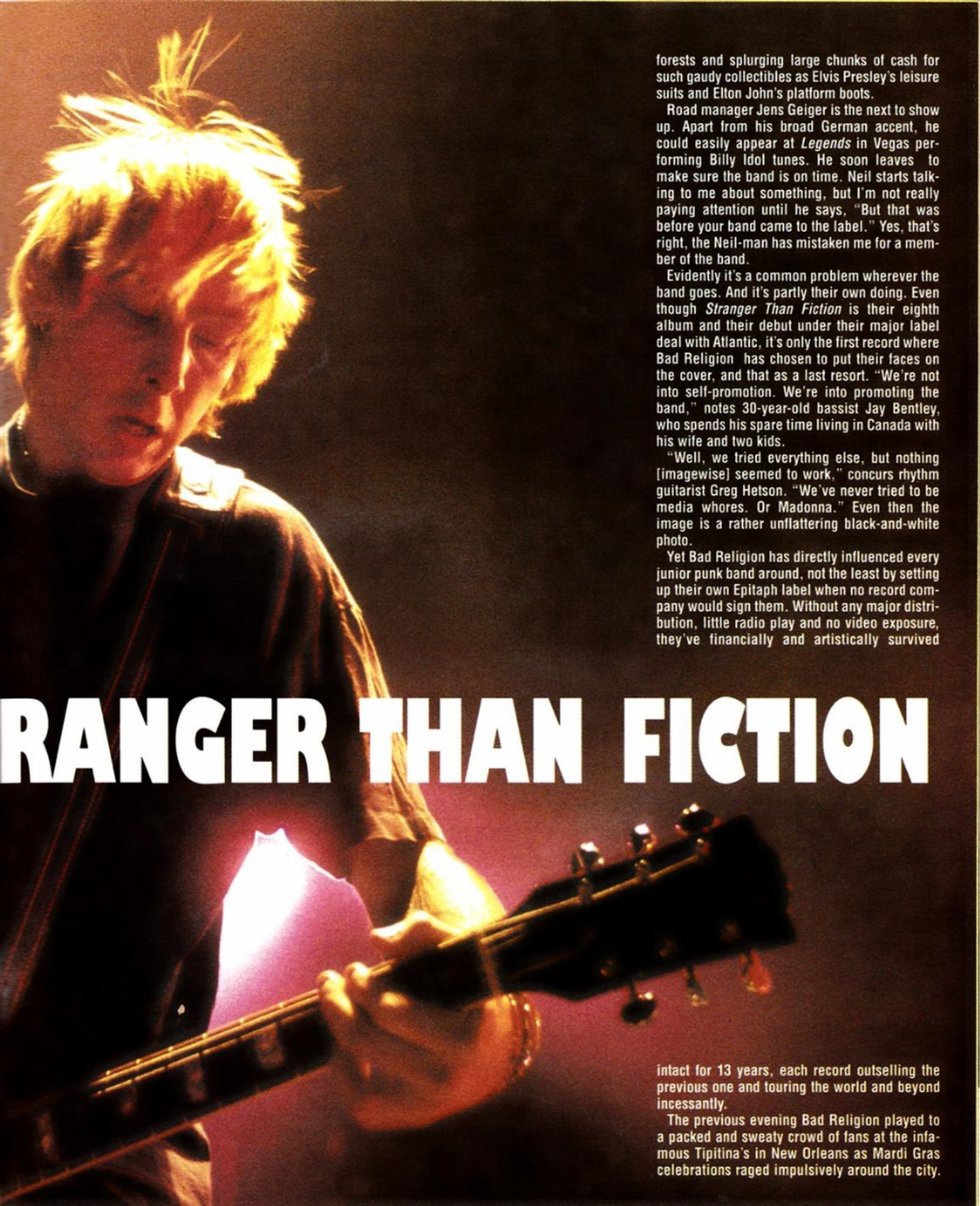
But first the band must participate in some of the promotional activities that have been a daily part of their regimen on this tour. KRQT 107.5, the Rocket, "Houston's New Rock Alternative" radio station, has recently set up shop, and according to Neil, the local Atlantic rep, every label is trying to "get in with them." This means

by Dominic Griffin

promotional activities galore, which apparently convinces radio stations to spin discs and mention concert dates. Recently the radio station ran a competition. The prize? Eat hamburgers at the

Hard Rock Cafe with Bad Religion and receive autographed drum skins.

It's 4:30 in the afternoon, and Neil punctually shows up 15 minutes early. He's thin, sports a



RANGER THAN FICTION

forests and splurging large chunks of cash for such gaudy collectibles as Elvis Presley's leisure suits and Elton John's platform boots.

Road manager Jens Geiger is the next to show up. Apart from his broad German accent, he could easily appear at *Legends* in Vegas performing Billy Idol tunes. He soon leaves to make sure the band is on time. Neil starts talking to me about something, but I'm not really paying attention until he says, "But that was before your band came to the label." Yes, that's right, the Neil-man has mistaken me for a member of the band.

Evidently it's a common problem wherever the band goes. And it's partly their own doing. Even though *Stranger Than Fiction* is their eighth album and their debut under their major label deal with Atlantic, it's only the first record where Bad Religion has chosen to put their faces on the cover, and that as a last resort. "We're not into self-promotion. We're into promoting the band," notes 30-year-old bassist Jay Bentley, who spends his spare time living in Canada with his wife and two kids.

"Well, we tried everything else, but nothing [imagewise] seemed to work," concurs rhythm guitarist Greg Hetson. "We've never tried to be media whores. Or Madonna." Even then the image is a rather unflattering black-and-white photo.

Yet Bad Religion has directly influenced every junior punk band around, not the least by setting up their own Epitaph label when no record company would sign them. Without any major distribution, little radio play and no video exposure, they've financially and artistically survived

intact for 13 years, each record outselling the previous one and touring the world and beyond incessantly.

The previous evening Bad Religion played to a packed and sweaty crowd of fans at the infamous Tipitina's in New Orleans as Mardi Gras celebrations raged impulsively around the city.

beard that isn't a goatee and looks like he shops from a Sears catalog. Often. He could easily segue from this event to handle a Kenny G promotion, and he wouldn't look out of place. But in

fairness, Neil has the seemingly awkward task of explaining to America's premier punk flag-wavers why they are about to eat hamburgers at a chain restaurant most noted for saving the rain

MTV showed up to tape the entire show. Los Angeles punkers Korn arrived to join the tour for one date only. As regularly scheduled touring act SNFU were warming up the mosh pit for the

headlining band, Hetson was hanging outside the club sipping a draft and chatting to road manager Geiger. About 100 fans are waiting in line trying to buy tickets to the already sold-out gig whilst some ticket holders are outside catching a breather.

Cappen and Kelli, a pair of 18-year-olds, have driven in from Dallas for the show and stand discussing Bad Religion not two feet away from Hetson. Soon they're talking to 32-year-old Hetson even though they don't realize who he is. It's understandable: He's quite short and starting to bald. His attire consists of a white, hooded sweatshirt, long shorts that swamp his skinny legs and those geeky glasses that he wears offstage. Onstage, he wears contacts, and his demure persona is nonexistent. He vaults about like a man possessed. He starts running from the back of the stage toward the

crowd as if he's about to do some bodysurfing, but he stops just short enough to do a Pete Townshend-esque jump in the air and then starts all over again. He'll do this for most of the hour-and-a-half, 31-song set. The Circle Jerks guitarist calls this routine "doing the geek." He claims that his stage antics help cover up the fact that he cannot play his guitar competently. In fact, he's still taking guitar lessons with "Eric Finn. F-I-N-N. I'll give him a free plug." He adds that, due to his inefficient playing, "I couldn't play with a Top 40 cover band. Maybe I could fake it... I can only do Bad Religion." You'd never notice. He comes off as punk virtuoso.

As the girls talk about one of their favorite bands, I turn to Hetson, in earshot of the girls.

"So, do you like this band Bad Religion or what?"

"Ahh, they're okay."

The girls convince us they're cool. When it's

explained to them that Bad Religion's guitarist is standing next to them, they take out their camera and snap a shot of Geiger! Hetson laughs at the situation. Later he explains that before many a show, band members will bet each other \$1 that they can walk through the crowd without being noticed. Sometimes, as part of the wager, this means standing in the mosh pit for three minutes. Still, they go unrecognized. However, when they hit the stage, it seems every member of the audience is singing along lyric for lyric, which is a feat, considering Graffin sings at the same pace as Joey Ramone.

Back in the lobby, the band members stroll in one by one, save for 28-year-old drummer Bobby Schayer. He's already at the venue setting up his own kit. He doesn't have to do it but he enjoys it. When not touring or recording with Bad Religion, he's a roadie for the Dickies 'cause, "I like being on the other side." Previously, he worked in the shipping department of A&M Records, responsible for Bryan Adams promotional tools, amongst other valuable product.

Neil seems nervous as he apologizes for the inconvenience.

"Yeah, I'm really sorry about this. But you know, the station has been playing the record and all, which has helped sell out the gig."

Wrong words, Neil.

"Well that must have been difficult, selling 800 tickets," quips Graffin sarcastically. Graffin's voice is beginning to hurt. Tonight's gig is the seventh in a row, and the band will play two more before they get a well-deserved day off, though most of it will be spent driving the 15 hours to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the next gig.

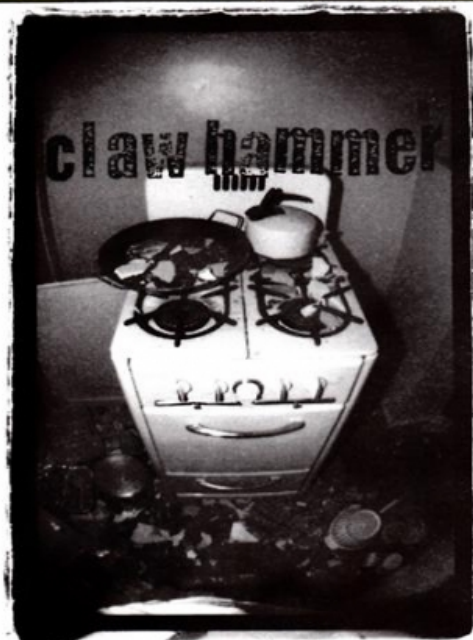
Neil stays sunk in his chair. Graffin has reason to mock. On their last tour, for *Recipe for Hate*, they sold out the same venue, yet *Stranger Than Fiction* has outsold that record nearly threefold, and MTV has been airing all of their video clips. The fact is, although they are constantly referred to as "Godfathers of Punk," they are still evolving and developing. Their popularity is growing, and it doesn't seem to be stopping. Still, for the mockery, the band remains good-natured about the business side of their careers, and as Hetson notes about the Hard Rock Cafe, "Hey, they got good hamburgers."

On the way to the restaurant, Neil proves his indie cred by tapping a clenched finger on the dash to the beat of an Alice in Chains song. He even hums a bar or two. Greg Hetson's wife, Shannon, is along for the ride. She grew up in Houston but now lives in L.A. with her husband. In an effort to turn her beloved into an Evan Dando-type sex symbol, she'll tell me, "My husband has the libido of nine teenage boys." Her husband argues that it is actually only of five. "I know better. I'm the one who has sex with him," she retorts.

Greg Graffin's only concern right now is that Neil will be able to bring him, Jay and new man in the BR camp, Brian Baker, to a local Malibu Grand Prix for a spot of Go-Kart racing between hamburgers and show time. All of the band members are fans of NASCAR, but these three are fanatical. When they were playing their way through Florida, they veered a little from their schedule so as to attend the Daytona 500. You won't find copies of porn or rock mags on their tour bus but rather *Car and Driver* and an assortment of other hot-rod publications.

As the band pulls into the cafe's parking lot, Greg Graffin groans aloud, "What are we doing here?" not really expecting anyone to answer. He isn't disappointed. No one answers.

Inside, the contest winners and Ethel, the promotions girl from the radio station, are waiting. When



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we get inside, the restaurant manager sheepishly approaches Jay.

"Have you got, like, a demo tape or something that we can play?"

Jay just laughs and points him in the direction of Ethel. As easy as it is to laugh at the situation, it does serve a purpose, and the band knows it. "Anything to help the band sell records," says Jay. "After all, that's what we're about." He knows about selling records. Only recently did he quit as an employee of Epitaph, where he was responsible for advertising.

"I'll never forget our first ad campaign," he laughs in fond remembrance. "It involved sitting in front of the TV stuffing envelopes with a 7-inch record, a photo-copy of an Epitaph/Bad Religion ad and a letter to magazine editors saying, 'Here's our record. Can you run this ad for free?' We had no money, but we were giving them something for free." Not surprisingly, *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* didn't feel obliged to run the ad but many a fanzine did, and so began the marketing of Bad Religion—the band, not the individual members.

However, of late, one band member has been getting a lot of attention: Mr. Brett Gurewitz. After completing the studio chores for *Fiction*, he opted to concentrate on Epitaph, his recording studio and family life. While it was hinted in the press for some time, Gurewitz never told the band in person, but rather informed them through their manager, Danny Heaps. Heaps in turn conference-called the rest of the band to see what they wanted to do. One week later, Brian Baker, ex-Minor Threat and Junkyard guitarist and consumer of 16 cans of Coke a day, was a member. Baker is almost insulted when I ask

"There's still some hostility on both ends. I think I'm the only one who has spoken to him since the split." —Greg Hetson on ex-member Brett Gurewitz

if he can tell the difference between Coke and Pepsi. He brags he can tell the difference between a can of Coke sold in Atlanta and one in California. I don't doubt him.

"I'm happy for Brett. More power to him. I would say there's a little less tension," says Schayer regarding Gurewitz' decision.

"I think we're having a lot more fun for some reason. I think Brett was a little bummed that he lost some of the control when he was no longer putting out the records," concurs Hetson. He goes on to admit that, "There's still some hostility on both ends. I think I'm the only one who has spoken to him since the split. I brought his kids some Christmas gifts, which I thought was the Christian thing to do." He jokes that he was going to send him a hatchet so that he can bury it.

The Los Angeles earthquake of January 17, 1994, is remembered by many for various reasons. For guitarist Baker, it was the day he lost his job. He was working at the Hollywood Athletic Club handing out racks of balls to the hip pool players of the city. The earthquake thrashed the pool hall, and it closed down for a while. Collecting unemployment and working under the table at a local rehearsal hall, he was offered the chance to try out for the gig as R.E.M.'s second guitarist on their current world tour. R.E.M. were impressed and offered him the job. The same week he tried out for Bad Religion. At

30 years of age and not feeling quite old enough to be a hired guitarist, he opted to become one fifth of Bad Religion.

After the hamburger incident, the band heads over to soundcheck. Graffin's voice is becoming more

irritated and as a result, his mood is suffering a little. He jokingly asks Shannon if she wants to sing a couple of numbers.

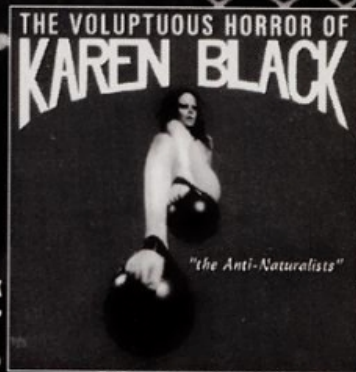
Baker had to learn 50 new songs for the band's first gig in front of 40,000 fans in Germany. Today at soundcheck he is asked to learn two more. By watching Bentley, he learns the new tunes in about the time it takes to play them. Graffin's very pleased with Baker's work and learning ability. And by the time Schayer clicks his drum sticks to introduce the first number, everyone's spirit and mood improves drastically. Graffin stalks the stage, Hetson does the geek, Baker does his "rain dance," Schayer pounds the shit out of his skins, tossing sweat everywhere, and Bentley is in his usual good mood adding the melodic harmony to Graffin's vocals. Bad Religion is a band that loves playing live. It's what they seem to live for. And the fans love them for it.

Greg Doughty, their monitor guy, has worked with many a band and is still amazed as to how good this band can be live. "When they do it right, no one can touch 'em." You really have to agree with him. Supposedly bigger bands can still learn from BR, even though Bentley says Bad Religion is still learning. Hell, he even says that "Greg [Graffin] was recognized by a 'vegetable technician' at a salad-bar restaurant the other day. And Hetson is getting noticed too." To paraphrase a Carpenters song, they've only just begun. •

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