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GOOD FELLAS

MR. BRETT and **FAT MIKE** are lifers, label heads and members of iconic American punk bands. You've heard their music; now check out their stories.

INTERVIEW: Jonah Bayer // **PHOTOS:** Myriam Santos

Brett Gurewitz and Mike Burkett are so well known in the punk world, they don't need formal names. Instead, they are largely known as Mr. Brett and Fat Mike, and in addition to starting two of the longest running punk bands of all time—Bad Religion and NOFX, respectively—they are just as famous for launching two of the scene's biggest labels, Epitaph Records and Fat Wreck Chords.

Both men have similar shared experiences in the punk scene. At some point along the way, Gurewitz focused on his label (the roster of which once featured NOFX) and Burkett decided to pursue both his band and his label. The rest is history: Gurewitz launched the careers of artists like the

Offspring and Rancid and has seen Epitaph (and its sister label, Anti-) grow into a powerhouse, while NOFX have grown from a goofy punk act into one of the biggest independent bands in the world. That dedication has also manifested itself in the form of two great records, Bad Religion's *The Dissent Of Man* and NOFX's rarities compilation *The Longest EP*.

AP went to the Epitaph headquarters in Los Angeles and sat down with both musicians to learn how their parallel journeys yielded wildly different outcomes while still managing to retain the same DIY ethics and integrity—and why they've never partied together.



How did you two meet?

BRETT GUREWITZ: I used to have a studio called Westbeach Recorders [that] had nothing to do with Epitaph; I was just trying to make things work as a studio owner/recording engineer from '85 to '87. I wasn't putting out any records, I was just trying to record as many bands as I could. I don't know how Mike got recommended.

FAT MIKE: We just heard Brett from Bad Religion had a studio and we loved Bad Religion.

GUREWITZ: So NOFX booked some time, and I remember producing [1988's

Liberal Animation] and thinking it was so awesome. [To Mike.] I recall I asked you if I could put it out and you said no, you wanted to put it out yourself.

FAT MIKE: Yeah, that was stupid. [Laughs.]

So where did the idea for Epitaph come from?

GUREWITZ: It was just [Bad Religion] putting out our own 7-inch, which is what you did back then, and we needed to put a name on the 7-inch, so...

FAT MIKE: I started the same way. NOFX did 500 7-inches in 1987 and then we did *Liberal Animation* in '88 and then we came to Epitaph. Then a



year later, I was seeing a lot of bands on tour and I was like, "I know how to do this," because at the time it was just Xeroxing a 7-inch cover and folding it. It was easy.

GUREWITZ: It was sort of like putting out a zine. I didn't know if I'd ever put out another 7-inch at the time, but you still name it something.

Mike, was your label inspired by what Brett had done?

FAT MIKE: Absolutely. I pretty much modeled my business after Brett, especially back then, when he only had a few employees. Lookout! Records was an influence, too.



GUREWITZ: My influences were Frontier and SST, those were the labels I looked up to.

FAT MIKE: One thing Brett told me a long time ago—which is something I've always kept in my mind when I was signing bands and dealing with employees at Fat Wreck Chords—is that we work for the bands, don't forget it. I think that's really good advice, and I've always done that. Because when you're someone who's been a band on a label and you also run a label, you get to see both sides really well.

What sticks out about the labels' early days?

GUREWITZ: I used to do everything. Literally, I did everything on [Bad Religion's] *Suffer*: I wrote songs, recorded it, mixed it, mastered it, sold it, pressed it, marketed it and then went out and toured on the record. To put this in perspective, this was before cell phones and the internet, so when you're on tour, the business is shut down.

FAT MIKE: When I started Fat, it was the same except when I was on tour, my wife would do mail order and ship orders out of my closet.

GUREWITZ: Then from '87 through the early '90s, we had about six employees. I was the boss, and we all had separate jobs but we all still pitched in. For example, I had lists of independent record stores across the country and I said, "There's six of us, so we can call 60 stores a day and tell them there's a new NOFX record coming out." At this time, there were only about 450 really cool indie stores in the country, so the six of us could call them all in about 10 days. It gave us a really personal relationship with them.

FAT MIKE: Then when we started doing that, I called Brett and said, "Can I have your list?" and he said, "All right." [Laughs.] That's how I do things.

How involved are you both at your labels today?

FAT MIKE: When I'm home, I go to the office maybe two or three hours a week, but I have two bands and a recording studio, plus I golf a lot and have a 6-year-old. All of my employees have been there for over 10 years, so they know what they're doing: I sign bands, produce and stay away from the everyday stuff.

GUREWITZ: And I work 40 hours a week, and I'm usually here from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

FAT MIKE: Oh, I'm an alcoholic, too, and that takes up a lot of time. [Laughs.]

GUREWITZ: And I'm an alcoholic, too, but I'm clean and sober so I have all that free time! [Laughs.] As far as roles go, I'm the opposite of Mike because I'm a non-touring member of my band and contribute the bare minimum, which is songwriting and producing. I have to devote half a day [to Bad Religion] for six months every three years, and when I'm not doing that, I'm running my business.

FAT MIKE: Polar opposites. I'll come up with an idea now and then be like, "Let's do a comp!" or "I saw a great band, let's sign them!" but I spend a lot of time doing 10 different things.

GUREWITZ: I love music and I still buy four or five records a month, but I also buy business books. I'm interested in social media, web design and even management. I read books on how to run meetings, so I'm a lot more boring.

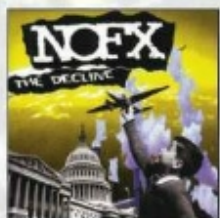
FAT MIKE: That's why Epitaph is still a huge powerhouse label, though.

GUREWITZ: I really respect what Mike did because he followed his muse, and when he had a lot of bands in the '90s that were huge, he decided to pursue being an artist full-time. And in the mid-'90s when I had a bunch of bands blowing up, too, I decided to leave my band and focus on my business, so that's when our paths diverged.

FAT MIKE: What's interesting is that Bad Religion were so much better than NOFX at that time. I mean, when you were putting out *Against The Grain*, we were putting out *Ribbed*. But I think me concentrating on the band kept us growing, whereas you put your energy into the label and that's what grew for you.

MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY

FAT MIKE AND MR. BRETT PICK
THEIR FAVORITE RECORDS
FROM EACH OTHER'S LABELS



BAD RELIGION

Against The Grain

"Suffer was amazing, but *Against The Grain* has more great songs. *Suffer* was like a punch in the face, but the songwriting on *Against The Grain* is way more developed."

—FAT MIKE

NOFX

The Decline EP

"It's such a great song with super-innovative production. To me, *The Decline* was like the shape of skate-punk to come."

—MR. BRETT

RANDY

The Human Atom Bombs

"*The Human Atom Bombs* is my most-listened album on Epitaph. I don't know what it is, but it's one of my favorite albums of all time. I just love that record."

—FAT MIKE

AGAINST ME!

As The Eternal Cowboy

"Their first record on Fat is the one that pretty much cemented them as keystones of the punk scene at the time. It's original, innovative and still sounds like nothing else before it or since."

—MR. BRETT

RANCID

...And Out Come The Wolves

"You could put any great album against *...And Out Come The Wolves* and it would be a battle, because it's one of the best punk albums of all time. I think it's better than any NOFX record."

—FAT MIKE

RISE AGAINST

The Unraveling

"Their debut album and one of my favorites, loaded with catchy, high-intensity songs."

—MR. BRETT

GUREWITZ: I think that's exactly right. We were probably pretty similar as people in '94, but our paths took us in different ways. I think we still have a lot in common and we love each other, but I'm more of a businessman now and you're more of a lead singer—even though you're still a pretty good businessman and I'm an okay musician.

FAT MIKE: Well, you're the best punk-rock songwriter, I reckon. But what I think is interesting is that we've never partied together and we never will.

GUREWITZ: Well, we might. You never know. [Laughs.] Never say never.

FAT MIKE: I used to drink a little bit, and then Brett got on drugs and we just never saw each other.

GUREWITZ: You're right: We *never* had a drink together, not even once. I was clean when we started working together. I was clean from '88 to '94 and that was during Bad Religion's most productive period. Then I went out and Bad Religion made three records for Atlantic, but I wasn't paying attention to it because I was really getting high with a vengeance. Then I got clean for the second time on Christmas '98 and spent two years getting my head together and then the band came back [to Epitaph]. But probably around the time I got clean is when you started partying really hard. It's too bad we didn't coordinate it; it would have been fun.

FAT MIKE: I tried drugs in the year 2000.

GUREWITZ: You don't have to talk about this if you don't want to, but for the record, in '83 or '84 when you were getting the band together, were NOFX a straight-edge band?

FAT MIKE: Eric [Melvin, guitar] and Eric [Sandin, drums] were, but I wasn't. They had Xs on their hands. They threw away my 40 oz.

GUREWITZ: That's okay, because Brian Baker was, and he's been known to see the bottom of a bottle [since then].

Mike: As far as signing acts, it seems like you mostly sign your friends and peers, while Brett didn't grow up with, say, *Bring Me The Horizon*.

FAT MIKE: No, he fathered them. [Laughs.]

GUREWITZ: Not only that, but I sign different kinds of music to [Epitaph and Anti-] now. What ends up happening is a label always starts with some kind of context. If you take what Epitaph and Fat did in the early days, you could pick any one band on either label and say, "If I like that band, I'll probably like this band, too." But in order to go past your adolescent stage and become a mature label, you have to diversify. Atlantic Records started as a rhythm and blues label and it's still around because they diversified at some point. Same thing with Motown.

FAT MIKE: But we don't fall into that category because Fat still has the same sound, but every five years we get lucky and find a band like Against Me! or Rise Against who sound different, but are in the same genre. A Fat Wreck Chords band might sound like the Clash or it might sound like Discharge, but you pretty much know what you're getting.

GUREWITZ: I made the decision in '99 to just be a great and successful record label. I felt that the '90s skate-punk sound was nostalgic at that point and just because I loved it, I didn't think it should limit me in terms of what I would put out. I just didn't want to be limited by punk; I like punk okay, but I hardly listen to it anymore.

FAT MIKE: Yeah, I still fucking do. I still go to punk shows and listen to punk records all the time. It's ridiculous. I have blue hair; I'm 43. I'm the corner pizzeria that's always been successful: Sometimes I might add a new topping or a calzone, but stress is my enemy. Which is why I really respect what Brett has done with his business over the years.

Do you think there could ever be another Fat or Epitaph?

GUREWITZ: Well there *is* another Fat or Epitaph, but it's called DFA or Secretly Canadian. It's happening all the time, and it'll keep happening because that's how cool labels come about. **ALT**