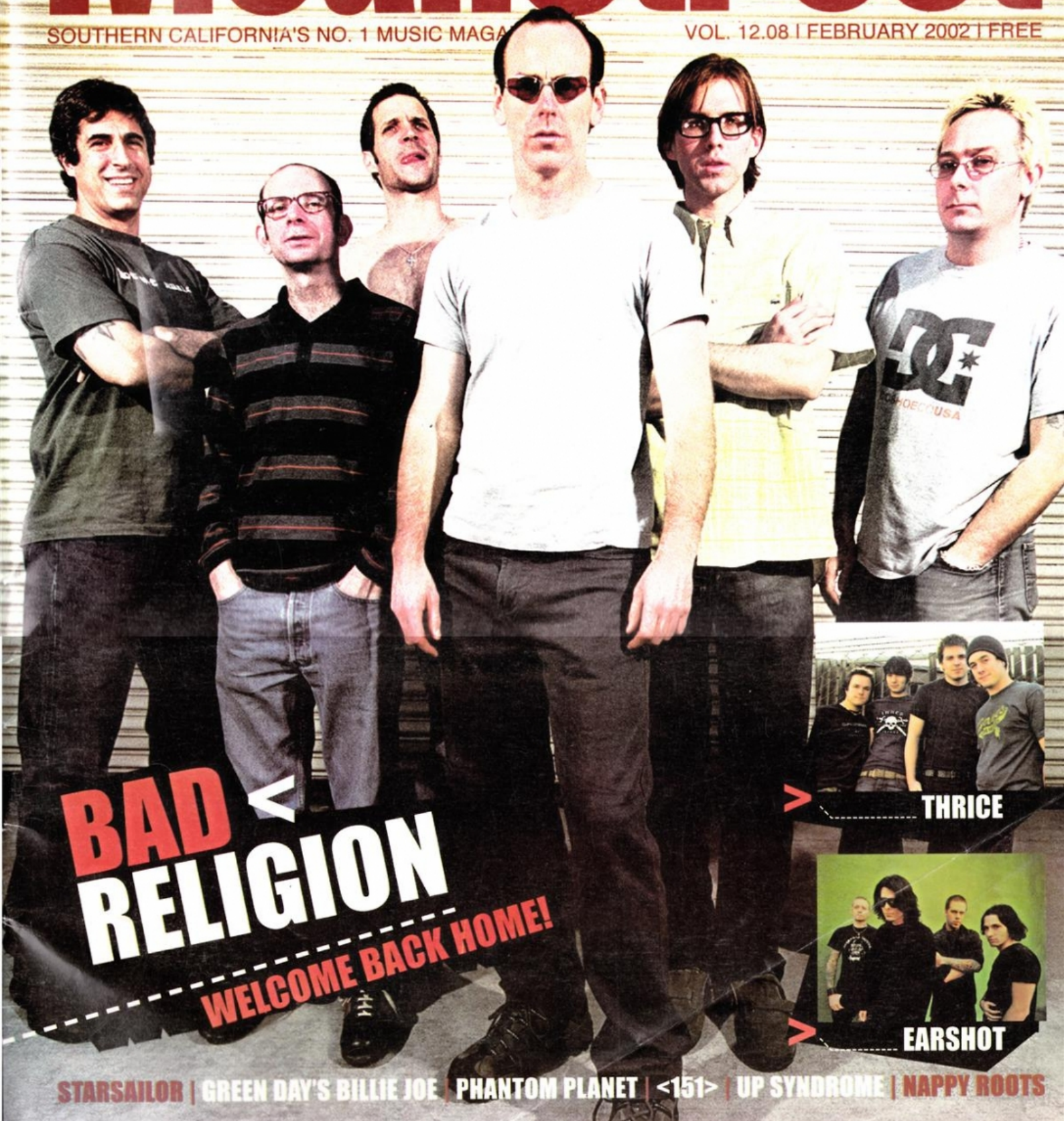


# MeanStreet

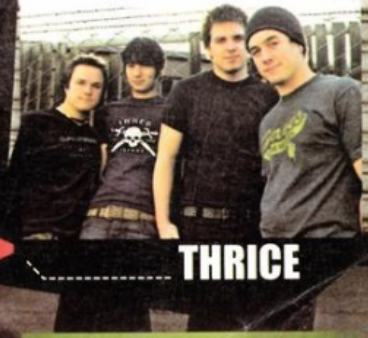
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S NO. 1 MUSIC MAGAZINE

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**BAD** <  
**RELIGION**

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# BAD RELIGION



"It is definitely a big deal to me, personally. I'm back in Bad Religion."

Story by Matt Schild  
Photo by Vaughn Youtz

For almost all of its post-pioneer history, California's been defined by the San Andreas fault. Running from San Francisco to San Diego, it's as much a part of the Californian myth as sunshine and surfer girls. At their most memorable moments, the whims of the tectonic plates have reshaped the Californian skyline and freeway system through rebuilding and cleanup efforts. At the very least, the 600-mile crack's hand is felt nearly everywhere, from onramp structures to building codes in this land of unstable soil.

If art imitates life, then Brett Gurewitz, Greg Graffin and Bad Religion are the San Andreas fault of the Californian punk world. Like the Californian landscape has been defined by more than just temblors — the money of dot-com boom towns, tourist attractions and Tinseltown have all done their bit to shape the West Coast — nobody is going to say that California's punk scene begins and ends with Bad Religion. Of course the band, and the record label Gurewitz founded to issue its records, Epitaph, have done more than their fair share to shake up the Californian punk scene.

"These young kids today say 'I hate Bad Religion. They sound generic,'" guitarist Brett Gurewitz says with a hearty laugh. "Hey man, it's not us that sounds like everyone else. That's *our* style. We're the ones who are allowed to sound like that. The other ones are being generic, not us. We started it. No, that's our sound. We invented that sound. We're not copying someone else who does that sound."

Gurewitz sits at his desk, the ideological center of Epitaph Records' Sunset Boulevard headquarters in Los Angeles and chuckles about the ignorance of the last crop of smack-talking skate-punks, grommets and other baggy-pants wearing street monkeys. He's not about to let the misunderstanding of his band's still-forming legacy throw a shadow on the day. After all, he's got the joy of talking about his return to his post as Bad Religion guitarist to chat about. There's a lot to talk about right there: *The Process Of Belief*, due out Feb. 19, marks the founding guitarist's first record with the band in seven years, since he parted ways with the band to concentrate on the burgeoning Epitaph empire. It's also the band's first release on Epitaph since it signed to Atlantic in 1994. Gurewitz has a lot to talk about that's more interesting than misconceptions of his band.

He's had quite an opportunity to touch on the more interest-

ing angles since the band announced he was returning to the flock in May. Amid a flurry of press releases, video hype pieces and pre-release hoopla, Gurewitz not-so-quietly reunited with singer/co-founder Greg Graffin, hunkered down in a practice space and brought the classic Bad Religion songwriting team into the new millennium. The label-driven hoo-ha wasn't just confined to press releases and footnotes in industry newsletters: Internet chat rooms, punk web sites and 'zines were abuzz with the news: Mr. Brett is back!

Of course, Gurewitz himself can't but get caught up in one of the biggest hypes in punk history since the reformation of the Sex Pistols. Heck, unless he moved to a Unibomber-style shack in the middle of the Nevada desert, he couldn't ignore it if he wanted to. That doesn't mean he's got to let the moment overshadow what he's here for: laying down the rock.

"There seems to be people placing a lot of importance on this release, so it's almost as if a lot rides on it," he admits. "I don't want to put that much emphasis on it. It is definitely a big deal to me, personally. I'm back in Bad Religion."

#### Some notable Californian quakes:

**San Francisco, April 18, 1906** — a tremor that's since been estimated as having a magnitude of 7.9 shook the bay area. On the San Andreas fault line buildings were toppled and trees torn asunder. Away from the epicenter, the minute-long tremor caused moderate damage, though in conjunction with the fires it caused, it did \$524 million in damage, and is estimated to have killed 3,000 people.

**Suffer, 1988 (Epitaph)** — Emerging from a three-year hiatus, a reunited Bad Religion delivered an album that'd become one of the classic punk platters of its era. Dual guitars lay down a wall of sound while Graffin's politically charged lyrics soar with the help of harmonies. *Suffer* would lay the groundwork for the band's continued success, and would eventually spawn a generation of followers such as Pennywise, No Use for a Name and the Deviates.

**Kern County, July 21, 1952** — a 7.7 magnitude temblor cracked reinforced concrete walls 46 inches thick, while the

ground near the epicenter was displaced nearly two feet. The quake claimed the lives of 12 people and resulted in \$60 million in property damage.

**Stranger Than Fiction, 1994 (Atlantic)** — Amid accusations of selling out, Bad Religion left Epitaph for the big leagues. The new label did anything but temper the band's power: A slicked-up version of *Against The Grain's* "21st Century Digital Boy" led the band into MTV, its best-selling album and a continuing rain of critical praise.

**San Francisco, Oct. 18, 1989** — The World Series was put on hold after a 7.1-magnitude temblor struck that collapsed portions of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge, killed 63 and caused nearly \$6 billion in damage. At the time, it was the most costly natural disaster in United States history.

**The New America, 2000 (Atlantic)** — Faced with the task of making the fourth record without Gurewitz, in decidedly non-Bad Religion fashion, Graffin teams up with producer Todd Rundgren. The slump deepens. A watered-down style leads the band to be panned by critics and largely ignored by fans. It would be the band's last effort for Atlantic.

The return to the flock was astonishingly easy for Gurewitz. Though the guitar player was at the heart of the Bad Religion creative process through its glory days, it'd been seven years since he sat down and tried to write a Bad Religion song. Since the unexpected success of the Offspring's *Smash* in 1994 pulled Epitaph reluctantly into the mainstream, he had turned his attention to the quickly burgeoning Epitaph Records empire. Under his full-time watch, the label issued a staggering number of punk records that get more than token admiration from the mainstream, from the straight punk of Rancid and Pennywise to the Refused's progressive hardcore. Along the way, Gurewitz made token efforts at songwriting, with a trickle of solo work squeezed out during the few lulls from the industry Epitaph allowed him. Nonetheless, his time away from the six string and half-stack, at the very least, a bit rusty at the daunting task of writing a new record. Was he up to the challenge?

"It was remarkably easy," he says. "I hadn't sat down with Greg to write a song in about five years or so. It was just like picking up where we left off yesterday. I think we wrote the whole record, more than the whole record, because we even wrote some songs that didn't make it, in like four months. When we decided to write this, we just went ahead and the songs just came out."

How true that is. The first song Gurewitz sat down to write for the band — mostly as a warm-up to the Bad Religion style — "Sorrow," wouldn't just make the cut onto *The Process Of Belief*, but would become the album's lead single and get pre-release

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play on KROQ. It's quite a note to start his songwriting off on: It mixes the rolling rhythms and downbeat guitars of dub with typical Bad Religion powerhouse guitars and vocal harmonies to take the Caribbean stylings of late-years Clash and take them for a stroll down Hollywood Boulevard. In fact, the ease in which "Sorrow" came out helped to ease the pressure that had built up with the avalanche of hype that surrounded his reunion with the band.

"After I wrote it, I was like 'If all the songs are this caliber, we're going to have a good record.' Writing that song took a lot of pressure off me, actually, because I was satisfied with the caliber of it," Gurewitz admits, "and then it just seemed like the floodwaters had opened up."

That they did. *The Process Of Belief* takes on the staggering weight of the Bad Religion catalog. The band's output flagged over the past half decade as the So-Cal style the band pioneered increasingly painted it into a corner of repetition and, as time wore on, an increasing number of sub-par tracks per album, but Gurewitz's return to the fold re-energized the outfit. It's almost as if the quintet hadn't hobbled through its last four albums.

Earthquakes are caused when large, floating sections of the Earth's crust, called tectonic plates, rub against each other. Long stable, though under tremendous strain, plates suddenly give into the geologic tension and pressure exerted upon them and — *viola!* — you've got an earthquake.

Consider Gurewitz and Graffin to be the opposing plates in the punk-rock San Andreas fault. Think of rest of the band (guitarists Brian Baker and Greg Heston, bassist Jay Bentley and

drummer Brooks Wackerman), as magma, the water table, a slowly eroding mountain range or whatever other relatively insignificant geological component you like; the fact that eight members in addition to Graffin and Gurewitz have played in the band without much notice from its fans proves they're punk-rock interchangeable parts. It's only the coming and goings of the band's artistic center — the friendly rivalry between the two songwriters — that causes fans to sit up and take notice.

Without the pressure of an opposing plate, a fault wouldn't cause an earthquake; it'd just slowly move on in the nearly undetectable process of continental drift. In the four albums where Graffin lacked the steady pressure of Gurewitz's songwriting, Bad Religion did just that: drift. Whether it was with a worn out trip into the old neighborhood with *No Substance* (1998, Atlantic) or the puzzling hope of pop flash that came with 2000's *The New America* (Atlantic), Graffin drifted, meandered, wandered — anything but trembled and shook things up — without Gurewitz's reassuring tectonic friction.

Gurewitz is the first to acknowledge the strange mix of rivalry and kinship that comes when he jams with Graffin. Although he politely passes up an opportunity to poo-poo Bad Religion's more questionable recent releases with silence, it's one of those no-comment sort of silences that usually come from politicians who sweat their way through a press conference and not guitarists. Polite as he may be, Gurewitz concedes that the competitive spirit between himself and his singer was one of the forces that drove the band to continually try to refine its sense of composition, test new ideological waters and generally keep expanding.

"There's always a healthy competition between me and Greg," he remembers. "In the early days it was along the lines of this: We'd come to rehearsal and Greg would say 'I've got a new song,' and I'd say 'Well, I've got a new song too.' Okay, let's learn them both today. Then I'd be rooting for my song to be the better one. We'd learn them both and because of human nature I'd always think Greg's song was better. So then, I would have to go home and try to write a song that was not better than my new song, but better than Greg's new song."

Of course, as the songwriting team grew long in the tooth, the adversarial slant that colored their earliest collaboration would eventually straighten into a more friendly and productive unit.

"Me and Greg realized after having us written over 100 songs together that we both write in the style called Bad Religion, and we both write good Bad Religion songs and we both write all right Bad Religion songs and every once in a while we both write an exceptional Bad Religion song. I think there's still a healthy competition there, but I think we have a little more perspective there and it's a little wiser. It's like we appreciate each other more than we used to."

As much effort as science has put into it, there's still no way of telling when the Big One will come. That's up to the plates, the faults and Mother Nature. Don't let the lull fool you.

*The Process Of Belief* doesn't register above eight on the Richter scale. It's probably not even a moderate seven-magnitude quake. That's not what's important, however. The Gurewitz/Graffin fault line is active once again. Punk rockers, start quake-proofing your homes.