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THE REUNION SESSIONS

BY JOHN ALBERT

BEFORE I DIED, I WAS THE DRUMMER IN BAD Religion. That was 15 years ago. Both of us are doing much better these days.

I found out about my supposed demise when I met the band in the small Hollywood studio where they were recording their latest album, *The Process of Belief*. (I had been summoned to write their press bio.) I hadn't seen them since my stint pounding the skins ended with my sudden, and apparently mysterious, disappearance. But I'll explain that a bit later.

Inside the studio, there was a lingering feeling of reunion. Not just for me, but for the entire proceeding. Greg Graffin and Jay Bentley were there, and Brett Gurewitz had finally returned. They were also back on Epitaph, which Brett started as an industrious teen to release the band's music when the major labels, predominantly staffed by coke-tooting Fleetwood Mac fans, wouldn't touch anything resembling punk with a well-manicured pinkie. The new songs sounded familiar, the accompanying conversations anything but. Some scenes from the sessions:

GREG IS NURSING A BOWL OF FRENCH ONION soup in a near-empty Hamburger Hamlet. He is hoping the cheese-laden broth will soothe his tired vocal cords, yet in a contradictory move is talking up a storm. Having just completed his second master's degree, this one in biology at Cornell, he is

explaining the topic of his upcoming Ph.D. dissertation. (Both of us were raised by academics, so our conversations have always tended toward the cerebral.)

The premise is that naturalism (science) is basically a new and improved religion that allows us to view things as they really are and, thus, learn from our mistakes. Naturalism is directly opposed to deism (religion), but there are some scientists who hold that a belief in both is compatible. This is called dualism. Greg doesn't recognize. "Dualism is a cop-out that leaves the door open for an inaccurate portrayal of human nature," he argues, "which is what has led to all of the social and ethical problems of the past. If scientists take a soft position, then there is no naturalism and we're stuck with the old ineffective traditional religion, which has come to fail us in so many ways."

This from someone who started a band called Bad Religion in high school. "I think I hit on something at a very young age that is easy to be consistent about," he says, "which is questioning religion. I guess I take it seriously as a lifelong path of inquiry." Then he laughs. "Jay, Brett and me were all present that afternoon when we decided not to call the band Vaginal Discharge. Then it was gonna be Bad Family Life, but we finally settled on Bad Religion."

Back in the studio, a full-speed, state-of-the-art punk song is thundering out of

the playback speakers. Greg stands in the small vocal booth and starts to sing the lyrics of a new song, "Materialist."

I'm materialist
I ain't no deist
It's there for all to see
So don't speak of hidden mysteries
with me.

THE SUN IS SHINING, AND BRETT AND I are reclining in the studio's cluttered patio, just off the shimmering asphalt of Hollywood Boulevard. When not writing songs for Bad Religion, producing albums for other bands or running his label, Brett informs me, he likes to spend as much time as possible indulging his true passion. He shrugs. "I'm a total chess geek," he says.

Last year a mutual friend of ours, Alex, told Brett of a chess camp. "I thought, wow, it'll be really cool. I'll have a whole weekend of nothing but chess, and have expert guys coaching me, and I'll really improve my game," he says. "I thought it was gonna be like when I was a kid and I went to John Wooden's basketball camp — that it would be on a ranch or something, and there would be a lot of people there. But it turned out to be me, Alex and his friend, and one other guy, and it was in Temecula at the house of an old retired conservative judge. The same

vibe as both my grandmas' houses, like a mausoleum, with lots of doilies and everything perfectly in place." He sighs. "I mean, basically this was an old couple and we were sleeping over at their house."

The judge wasn't a master, Brett says, "but he had devised a methodology of chess coaching called 'Fishbusters.' In chess, there are different slang names for bad chess players. They call them 'potzers' and they call them 'fish.' Fishbusters was supposed to be his patented method for curing you of being a fish."

So there was the millionaire punk tycoon sleeping in a bunk bed in the den. "I was freezing all night, but I didn't want to ask for another blanket, because I thought this old couple was looking askance at me, like I was the coarse ruffian with tattoos invading their world."

The next day, "we wake up and the old guy has converted his garage into a little rumpus room with some tables and a chalkboard. And the Fishbuster just starts lecturing, basically asking trick questions like, 'How does a bishop move?' And we would answer, 'Diagonally.' And he would say, 'Wrong! A bishop exerts a field of force in all diagonal directions, creating a star.' He lectured all day and we didn't play one game." Brett shakes his head. "It was quite the opposite of what I had imagined."

But the next day, they actually got to play. "We wake up and the old guy has built

a giant chessboard outside in the dirt, using that white lye they use for football fields. And he's made these giant chess pieces, figurines on top of three-foot wood sticks. We were supposed to divide into teams and move the giant pieces around, discussing each move. I told them I wasn't feeling well and went back to my bunk bed."

THE REST OF THE BAND EMERGES FOR A break. A discussion ensues about the strange foods our respective fathers eat, and the notion that when one reaches a certain advanced age, things that once seemed repulsive might suddenly become appetizing. His curiosity piqued, Brett sends out for a quart of buttermilk to test the theory. Twenty minutes later, we're all sipping surprisingly refreshing glasses of the curious dairy product.

THE MEMBERS OF BAD RELIGION ARE FEED-ing at a Hollywood noodle house. Everyone is laughing about a story from back when I was in the band and skateboard legend Tony Alva, on a bill with us playing bass in the Skoundrelz, submerged a stingy concert promoter upside down in a Lake Tahoe snow bank. I offer that touring is probably not so volatile at this stage in the band's career, and Greg shakes his head. At a recent show in San Sebastián in Spain, he says, "The entire floor collapsed. During the first song, everyone was jumping up

and down simultaneously, and this huge hole opened up, and 900 people fell down a 20-foot drop into a parking garage underneath. Ambulances came for six hours carrying people away. The floor just caved in right before my eyes, people screaming and trying to hold on to the side. Thankfully, no one died." Everyone nods solemnly. "And in Amsterdam," he says, "an armless thalidomide baby did a stage dive."

I stand corrected.

BRETT AND I ARE DRIVING THROUGH HOLLY-wood after the band has taped a performance for *The Late Late Show* with Craig Kilborn. A crowd of sunbaked tourists had cheered as the band walked out and blasted through a new song. They had played well, but Brett admits he was slightly nervous. It all feels a bit new for him. We talk about how rare it is for bands to remain vital for any length of time these days, and Brett laments that perhaps it's just hard to be an adult and play in a rock band. I mention some veteran artists who are still popular, and he says, "Yeah, but you know, they're all really still teenagers."

Just then, we pass an enormous billboard featuring the airbrushed faces of multiplatinum-selling corporate shills Aerosmith. I groan. Brett is silent.

I JOINED BAD RELIGION IN 1984, WHEN THE band had hit an all-time low. There was a

sudden vacancy in the rhythm section, and Greg had heard that I was a drummer. That was only somewhat true. In reality, I merely owned some drums. Nevertheless, when he asked me to join I said yes, then went home with a tape of songs and practiced for five weeks until our first actual rehearsal. Punk rock is not jazz fusion. I carried it off, barely, and continued to improve as we went along. With only one original member in the band, Greg, it felt much like being in one of those oldies groups you see touring the state fairs, or, I suppose, the latest version of Guns N' Roses.

My first live performance was in San Francisco at a graffiti-covered punk landmark called On Broadway. I had been nursing a respectable drug habit off and on for years, and the night of my illustrious debut I soothed both my stage jitters and my withdrawal symptoms by downing handfuls of red pills. My memory is a bit mushy, but I do recall an enormous skinhead perched behind me for the entire set, leaning in and screaming encouragement from an inch away, so other than an earful of beer spit, I believe the evening was a success.

A year later, after the infamous show in Lake Tahoe, we all crashed at the plush vacation home of a teenage punkette whose parents had made the mistake of leaving town for the weekend. Morally infirm at the time, I absconded with a small me-

mento of our short stay, a trophy of a cherubic man swinging a golf club with the creepy inscription "King of the Swingers."

Within months, I'd sold all my possessions, pawned my beloved drum kit, and found myself in an empty room with only my shuddering despair and that strange little trophy. After running afoul of the law one night, I was abruptly remanded to an ultrastrict drug-treatment center whose mustachioed and heavily tattooed staff forbade all contact with the outside world. Thus, as I was informed recently by a rather sheepish Greg, it was believed by some that I had left this world.

Several years ago, visiting that same treatment center — as an alumnus of good standing — I heard a voice call my name from across the courtyard and turned to see a tall, rail-thin man with a thick, drooping mustache. He resembled a Jewish Doc Holliday. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be Brett, who had suffered his own well-publicized bout with narcotics and was now freshly on the mend.

LATE ONE NIGHT WHEN I WAS IN THE STUDIO watching the band record vocal tracks, they called me in to help them yell out a single-word chorus for "Evangeline" (consisting of merely the song title). We accomplished it in one perfect take, and after 15 years away, I had finally made it onto a Bad Religion record. ■