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Bad Religion Church of the Holy Punk?

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Life After Brett:

Bad Religion—LA Punks in It for the Long Haul

by Jon Matsumoto

IN 1980, GREG Graffin and Jay Bentley were just two of a total of six punks at El Camino High School in the thoroughly suburban community of Woodland Hills, CA.

In today's "anything goes" fashion climate of pierced body parts and maverick hair designs, a head of green locks and a "Green Day" T-shirt would probably enhance rather than impede a teenager's social life. But 16 years ago, it was routine for kids to get harassed and sometimes physically abused (even in Southern California) for looking and acting punk.

"It was actually very violent," recalls Graffin. "It's surprising to people today but not to me, because I was in the thick of it. I got beat up basically for my philosophical beliefs, and because I didn't like the music that was popular at the time."

Still, for these renegades, being punk outlaws amid a school mired in the billowy arena rock of the day (think AC/DC or Pink Floyd) was all part of the fun. While their peers were content with just listening to music, Bentley and Graffin, along with another like-minded comrade named Brett Gurewitz, seized upon punk's do-it-yourself ethic and formed a raw, minimalistic hardcore outfit called Bad Religion.

AT THE TIME, GRAFFIN AND BENTLEY WERE 15 YEARS OLD; GUREWITZ was a few years older. While no one knew how long this just-for-fun band would last, none of these outcasts could have predicted that, 16 years later, they would be buzzing along bigger and bet-



SHREVE NELSON

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—Greg Graffin

ter than ever, perhaps even on the threshold of stardom. After all, with just a half dozen punks in your school, how far could you be expected to take such a venture?

But Bad Religion haven’t just endured; they’ve managed to prosper in a way that was hard to conceive before the landscape-altering success of Nirvana’s *Nervous Mind* album in 1991. *Stranger Than Fiction*, this former indie band’s 1994 album and their first effort for corporate giant Atlantic Records, has currently sold over 850,000 copies worldwide. Now the group is hoping to build on that momentum with its soon-to-be-released second album for the label.

For Bad Religion, the new album represents a major turning point in their history. This is their first recorded work without the presence of Gurewitz, who, along with Graffin, served as one of the group’s two songwriters. Gurewitz left the outfit to devote his time exclusively to running Epitaph Records, the “punk” label founded by Bad Religion and now owned by the guitarist.

Graffin is keenly aware that the band’s longtime followers are anxious to find out if he’s capable of carrying the creative load largely by himself.

“I knew before I started writing that there was going to be a tremendous amount of pressure to fill those shoes,” reveals Graffin, one of the only punk rockers currently working toward a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology. “But with [Brett] gone, it’s actually freed up a lot of my creativity and has allowed me to write things that in the past I would say, ‘Well, Brett’s going to take care of that.’ So, in that way, it was liberating.”

It’s helped that Bad Religion are a far more harmonious entity, both creatively and interpersonally, than they’ve been in years. It’s no secret that Gurewitz’s departure and the addition of easygoing guitarist Brian Baker (formerly of Minor Threat and Dag Nasty) has done wonders for group unity. The band also includes ex-Circle Jerk guitarist Greg Hetson and drummer Bobby Schayer.

Bentley says Graffin was much more communicative while writing the songs for *The Gray Race* than with any recent album. Although the band members all live in different cities throughout North America, the Ithaca, NY-based Graffin solicited opinions from band members by sending them tapes of his songs in progress.

Before the split, Gurewitz and Graffin seemed to be heading in different creative directions. “Brett wanted to write the perfect pop song,” says Bentley. “A lot of his songs started to delve into that area toward the end. But Greg was always more folk based. You expect him to write songs that will draw attention to what he’s saying [lyrically].”

Graffin has long been the band’s political and social idealist. His left-leaning songs deal with some pretty heady issues from media manipulation to religious hypocrisy to noxious nationalism. In fact, this is the only band in existence that can claim Noam Chomsky, the political analyst, media critic, and renowned linguist, as a fan and collaborator. During the Gulf War, Graffin recruited Chomsky to contribute a spoken word segment to

an anti-war single the band recorded and released.

Even as a teenager, Graffin wrote some pretty brainy material. Sample lyrics from his 1982 existentialist song “We’re All Going to Die”: “Early man walked away as modern man took control / Their minds weren’t quite the same, to conquer was their goal / So he built his great empire and slaughtered his own kind / Then He died a confused man, killed himself with his own mind.”

“There was a schism in the band,” reveals Graffin of the creative and philosophical differences

between himself and Gurewitz. “It was Brett’s marketing interests versus my musical and intellectual interests. It really created a tough situation as co-leaders of the band. Now it’s obvious that I’m in the songwriting position. The guys, though they’re welcome to pursue any songwriting directions they want, still rely on me to come up with the bulk of the material. [Now] they can concentrate less on what direction the band is going to take and a lot more on contributing to the band in the way they know best, which is their music and their ideas on arrangements. We’re actually a lot more together as a unit than we’ve ever been.”

Gurewitz declined to be interviewed for this story.

Interestingly enough, *The Gray Race* isn’t exponentially different from the last few Bad Religion albums. Graffin’s cutting social observations are still there—and much of the torridly paced music is still infused with a high-octane melodicism. “My fear was that [the album] would be [too] Greg-like,” admits Bentley, who now resides in Vancouver with his wife and two kids. “So, it was surprising and nice for him to be writing in styles that I wouldn’t expect from him.”

The Gray Race does possess a cleaner sound than the band’s previous albums. Producer and former Cars’ leader Ric Ocasek was recruited to bring a sonic sophistication to a unit that had a long tradition of being self-produced. (The band also brought in another outside producer, Andy Wallace, to help with *Stranger Than Fiction*.)

As with their move to Atlantic, the band really didn’t consider how their relationship with the “un-punk” Ocasek might be perceived by alternative rock purists.

“You get to a point where you can’t self-teach anymore,” argues Bentley. “You need outside help. You need someone to say, ‘Do this knob’ or ‘Don’t use that compressor because it’s bad for the vocals.’”

Bad Religion’s move into the mainstream is particularly impressive, considering it was always a part-time project for their members. Graffin has spent much of his adult life getting his education at UCLA, where he received his undergraduate degree and master’s degree in geology, and at Cornell University, where he became a biology doctoral student in 1990. Meanwhile, Bentley worked for Gurewitz at Epitaph. Essentially, the band toured and made albums around Graffin’s academic schedule.

But last year, Graffin took an indefinite leave of absence from Cornell, where he is researching the evolution of bone tissue, so that he could con-

centrate on the band and his wife and two children. And he's finding life much more manageable without the burden of academia. "It's more normal," he says. "I have a career and I have a family as opposed to having two careers, one of which pays the bills and the other one which is my intellectual pursuit. My children are getting to an age now where I have to be more focused."

As an interview subject, Graffin has sometimes been termed "difficult." But in a recent one-hour question and answer session, he proved surprisingly accommodating and straightforward.

Baker believes the singer is a different person than the one he met when he first replaced Gurewitz a year-and-a-half ago.

"He's gotten a lot more mellow," offers Baker, who turned down an offer to tour as a side musician with R.E.M. in order to join Bad Religion. "I don't mean that in a hippie way. The lack of tension that had existed between two dueling songwriters, coupled with this record, which Greg pretty much did himself...he's a lot happier and easier to deal with as a result of those things. It's neat to see that everything worked out in the end. Greg's become a better songwriter and Brett's happier because he's doing what he wants to do."

Bad Religion's upward mobility is sweet revenge for Graffin. It's not just that the vocalist and songwriter can now thumb his nose at all the narrow-minded thugs that used to ride him during his high school years. But to Graffin, the band's success represents a kind of one-fingered gesture directed at the early-'80s punk cognoscenti, which he feels never gave his band its just due.

"We were never part of the elite of that [early-'80s Los Angeles punk] scene, as evidenced by [its omission from the noted LA punk documentary] *The Decline of Western Civilization* or any of those books about the LA punk scene," observes Graffin. "I always felt a little bit cheated. ... Our first two records were not taken very seriously by the media or the punks in the scene. We had a very small but very loyal following. If you asked any of these so-called experts what the cool and lasting impressions from the scene were, they usually mention a lot of extinct bands and don't even mention Bad Religion. The fact is that Bad Religion has proven not only to be relevant in terms of longevity, but one of the most relevant in terms of numbers of people to hear us. It's kinda peculiar that even back then, our own scene was plagued by a narrow tunnel vision."

Indeed, many of those lucky enough to be a part of LA's extraordinarily vital early-'80s punk movement probably expressed surprise when Bad Religion end-

ed up being that scene's most visible and commercially potent survivor. True, the band never did get the fan or press attention accorded such beloved SoCal hardcore outfits as Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, and Social Distortion. But many of the punk groups from that era folded years ago with their integrity largely intact; others seem to fade in and out of the margins of the alternative rock scene.

However, Bad Religion's belated success (punk bands usually start out with a bang and then wither) really isn't that hard to fathom. Graffin may seethe at the lack of respect accorded his band a decade-and-a-half ago. But Bad Religion were rarely as convincing as many of their contemporaries when it came down to hammering out the chaotic rants that defined *hardcore* punk.

In retrospect, they were a band that needed time to find their true personality. By the late '80s, Bad Religion had improved dramatically by fine-tuning a punk-pop sound that set the table for similarly stylized multi-platinum-sellers like Green Day and the Offspring. By this time, the group was selling out shows at the Hollywood Palladium after years of headlining clubs.

Bad Religion have clearly benefitted from the mainstream's infatuation with "punk," an attitude they unwittingly helped create. Still, nobody is yet talking about this veteran band headlining the Lollapalooza tour. Still, Graffin wonders if punk chic is ultimately going to be detrimental to those young bands who have parlayed this love affair into truly big bucks. (Green Day's *Dookie* album has sold an astonishing 10 million albums.)

"I see this is as a very crucial time in punk music," observes Graffin. "Any time bands get blown out of proportion, you set yourself up for being has-beens; you set yourself up for being untrendy. If you capitalize on the trends, then you also suffer when the trend is no more. That's why I feel very comfortable that Bad Religion have always existed somewhere below the mainstream. We don't have to maintain a position in pop music."

Bad Religion may not ever want to be considered trendy, but they signed with Atlantic Records in part to broaden their audience further into the mainstream. It's hardly the first alternative rock outfit to make the jump from an independent label to a major record company. Yet their move into the corporate rock world caused far more arched eyebrows than usual.

Y'see, Bad Religion have been associated with punk's independent spirit from the band's very birth. When several record companies rejected their first demo tape in 1980, the group started Epitaph as a means



of getting their own albums made and distributed. They released four records (two albums and two EPs) before the label folded in the mid-'80s, a period of diminished band activity which also saw the temporary departure of both Gurewitz and Bentley. Several years later, Gurewitz decided to revive the label on his own after deciding to re-enter the record company business. And when he and Bentley rejoined Bad Religion in around 1987, the band began to record for Epitaph once again.

The group recorded five more albums for the label and established themselves, along with Fugazi, as one of the most respected and successful D.I.Y. bands in rock. It was living proof that a group could sell in excess of 200,000 copies of an album without the help of a major label. And when Epitaph's the Offspring went through the commercial roof several years ago, they turned the company into the hottest independent label in the land.

But as Epitaph grew more successful, Gurewitz and Bentley found it increasingly difficult to tend to both the record company and Bad Religion. Ultimately, the two band members were forced to decide whether they wanted to be aligned with Bad Religion or Epitaph.

"I have so much respect for people who are running independent labels," states Bentley, who left the label in the late '80s. "For the longest time, Epitaph was just me and Brett. Bad Religion was selling 80,000 to 100,000 records and we were doing it—just two guys in a warehouse

throwing it out there. The phone would ring, and I would pick it up. 'Can I talk to Jay from Bad Religion?' 'Yeah, that's me.' 'Can you play my high school prom?' 'No, sorry.' Eventually, you have to let go of all of those things. I've got boxes stacked on my head, and I'm trying to tell someone I can't play their high school prom, and they're pissed off at me. That's when you say, 'We need somebody else to do this.'"

Graffin takes exception to the notion that Bad Religion sold out by signing with Atlantic. He believes a conformist would have stayed with the hip Epitaph label with its loyal but specific following and roster of cutting-edge bands like Rancid, Pennywise, and the Offspring. To him, Bad Religion took a risk by going to a label with better distribution but little or no history in dealing with punk acts with a potent political message.

For Graffin, the goal isn't just to reach more people musically, but it's to inspire them to greater social awareness. Indeed, if Chomsky or any other muted political voice had a chance to appear on *Nightline* for a week, they would undoubtedly run with that opportunity. Graffin feels the same way about his music.

"When people have something to say, it's important to use all the media that you can accumulate," he argues. "It's the same thing for a band. If a band have something valuable to say, then by all means get it heard by as many people as possible. The sad truth is that it usually results in the diminishing of the quality of what they

have to say. Because what you have to do to appeal to the masses is water down your original idea or you have to water down how you say it. But Bad Religion are trying to show that's not necessary."

However, one senses that Graffin has reservations about his band's ability to reach a truly mass audience. Three or four years ago, he told a writer that he thought rock fans would have to start reading a lot more if Bad Religion were to experience a commercial breakthrough. Despite the group's increased popularity, it's a view he still harbors.

"To be super-popular, your music has to be more fun and less thought provoking," he says. "When I grew up, I devoured a record. I read every word on the insert. The real music fans are the ones who want to know about every element that went into making the songs."

Marketing this band based on any saleable, nonmusical image would also appear to be an uphill climb for Atlantic. Bad Religion may have a long history, but only the unassuming looking Graffin is generally recognizable to the band's average fan. Before shows, group members will sometimes bet each other a dollar that they can walk through the crowd unnoticed.

"Even I can get away without being noticed sometimes," laughs Graffin. "There are no distinguishing characteristics that say, 'Hey, there's a singer of a band.' I kind of take pride in that; being more in one with the people."

That Graffin can still feel at one with an audience that's generally between 15 and 25 years old says a lot about why Bad Religion have survived as a vital and contemporary punk act. At 31, his life is radically different than it was when he helped kickstart the band 16 years ago as a disaffected kid from a broken family.

In many ways, life was a lot less complicated back when the LA punk scene was tight, carefree, and relatively underground.

"It was a time when there were no rules," recalls Bentley. "We had this band thing that was fun. At any given moment, you could end up in Orange County at a party. Then you're in Huntington Bay, surfing, and then you'd go to a T.S.O.L. band practice. After that, you'd hook a ride back to Hollywood and end up at Oki Dog (a favorite punk hangout). When you're 15, you just take that stuff for granted."

Certainly, the band no longer operate on the same semi-informal level it did back in the early '80s. Due to the great geographical distances between members and busy personal schedules, tours and recording sessions have to be well-planned and coordinated.

Still, Baker feels the group has endured partly because an uncommon musical bond has allowed their members plenty of private breathing space.

"We get together three or four days before a tour and we're pretty much in there," says Baker, who recently returned to his hometown of Washington, DC, after a nine year stay in LA. "It's a unique thing. The luxury it affords us is that we don't have to be around each other all the time. As a result, when we're together, it's a special, purposeful thing. Then we retreat to our own separate corners. It's healthy."

It's also significant that Bad Religion have tried to avoid looking at themselves in career terms.

"There's no grand scheme at all," states Baker, who just two years ago was making \$6 an hour working at an LA rehearsal studio. "It will continue as long as it's fun for people in the band and as long as it's still interesting." ★