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AMONG THE GRIZZLED VETERANS WHO MAKE UP BAD RELIGION, THERE'S MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS OF EXPERIENCE ON PUNK'S FRONT LINES. SO WHY DID IT TAKE THEM SO LONG TO MAKE THE ALBUM OF THEIR LIVES?

BY CHRIS ZIEGLER | PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX TEHRANI

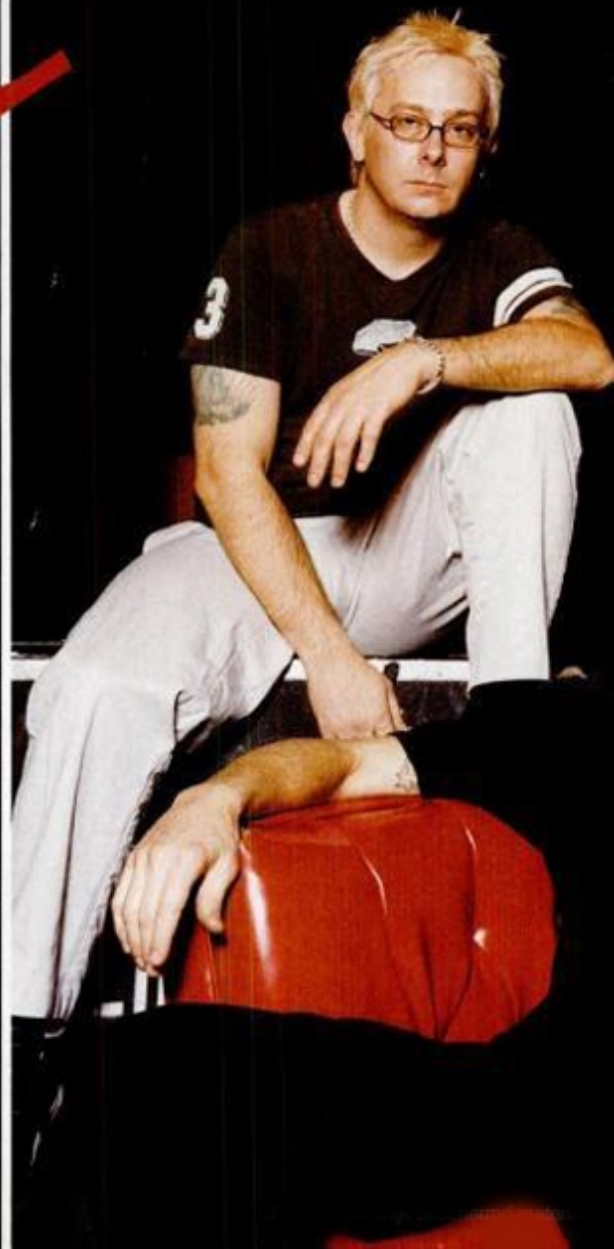
In the beginning, there was Bad Religion. And they were four peach-fuzzed geeks rattling around a garage in Southern California's San Fernando Valley. And it was good. Yet, somehow, 20 years later, they're better, though noticeably older. On a crisp Los Angeles day, the band is converging on a soundstage to shoot a video for their new single, "Broken." "Can you ask that gray-haired guitarist to move to the left?" says one baby-faced sound technician, referring to 39-year-old guitarist Brett Gurewitz.

With their receding hairlines and sensible pants, the guys in Bad Religion affect an air of anonymity, but the new-and-improved Bad Religion lineup that made its debut on January's *The Process of Belief* should speak for itself. Since 1984, the two core members, singer Greg Graffin and bassist Jay Bentley, both 37, have been joined by ex-Circle Jerk Greg Hetson, 40; in 1994, Brian Baker, 36, a founding member of hardcore heroes Minor Threat, came aboard. For *Belief*, they're rejoined by founding guitarist Gurewitz, whose departure seven years ago was a blow to the band's heart and soul.

It may have taken two decades to reach this point, but there's something inevitable about the current makeup of Bad Religion. While studying geology at UCLA in the early '80s, Graffin was obsessed with the Circle Jerks. When Hetson first heard the young Bad Religion, they quickly became his favorite band. And, of course, all of Bad Religion were huge Minor Threat fans. It was only a matter of time before they found one another. "It's like 'Bad Religion Ultra!'" Graffin says proudly.

Four albums on Atlantic failed to make Bad Religion the opiate of the masses, and *Belief* is the band's first LP since 1993's *Recipe for Hate* to appear on Epitaph, the indie label Gurewitz founded in 1981. *Belief* features the band's trademark (probably literally, these days) sound—hardcore riffing beneath polished vocal harmonies—augmented by keyboard flourishes, acoustic guitar, and even some tape-loopy wish-wash. Compared to the music of Bad Religion's Atlantic years, which often seemed like the work of well-meaning pros adding too much gloss to their grit, *Belief* sounds more mature. And, of course, befitting the band that pioneered "thesaurus rock" ("Is your fecundity a trammel or a treasure?" Graffin sang on 1989's "I Want to Conquer the World"), the new album is packed with tongue-twister lyrics that address everything from interpersonal strife to geopolitical struggle.

"One of the earliest styles of music I was ever exposed to was old-timey American folk music," Graffin says during a break in filming. "We used to have sing-alongs with acoustic guitars and piano. One of the traditions in that music is storytelling, and they fit a lot into each verse. That might be how I first recognized that you could cram





Another bad creation: Brian Baker, Jay Bentley, Brooks Wackerman, Greg Hetson (leaping), Brett Gurewitz, and Greg Graffin

WHAT YOU TALKIN' 'BOUT, BROOKS?

For singer Greg Graffin and bassist Jay Bentley, Bad Religion has been a lifelong commitment. The other four band members took a lot of detours before finding their religion



Bad 4 Good

Though only 14, new drummer **Brooks Wackerman** played with Suicidal Tendencies as well as funk-metal Suicidal spinoff Infectious Grooves (sample song title: "You Lie...and Yo Breath Stank"). His early-'80s band Bad 4 Good featured singer Danny Cooksey, who once enjoyed a recurring role on *Diff'rent Strokes*.



Daredevils

You know **Brett Gurewitz** as Bad Religion's founding guitarist and the man who launched Epitaph records (and a million mall Mohawks). But did you know that soon after leaving Bad Religion in 1994 under murky circumstances, he wrote a song called "Hate You," which he performed with his short-lived band the Daredevils?



Circle Jerks

Greg Hetson is known to any student of Los Angeles punk as an original member of the Circle Jerks, whose 1983 LP *Golden Shower of Hits* remains a high-water mark of hardcore smartassness. Fewer remember that as a teen he was a member of Red Cross, local pop-punkers who later courted fame as Red Kross.



Junkyard

Brian Baker has lived a charmed punk-rock life, from his days with hardcore pioneers Minor Threat and Government Issue to stints with the underrated Dag Nasty and gross-outs the Meatmen. Just prior to joining Bad Religion, Baker was a member of the Sunset Strip band Junkyard, who released three albums of raunchy booze-metal.

a lot of information in each line and end up telling a pretty rich story."

For the past several years, Graffin has been working toward a Ph.D. in zoology from Cornell, studying the way modern theorists of evolution conceive religion. It's a subject that spills over into the band's music. "We're more into philosophy than politics," he says. "One of the things we've sung about for a long time is the philosophical school of naturalism—how you can have a naturalistic viewpoint that counters the religious viewpoint but still hope for a better world."

"I remember having the discussion when we were 15 that we didn't want to be locked into just screaming, 'Fuck the cops!'" Bentley says. "We wanted something more than that."

"Though I don't mind saying, for the record, that I hate cops, to the max," Gurewitz says. "If you could put that in *Spin*, I'd be so happy."

"I WAS AN ARROGANT PRICK, AND THEN I BECAME A RECLUSIVE heroin addict," Gurewitz states flatly. "I had my big success and questioned all my values, and I just didn't handle it well. I've come out on the other side with a little bit of wisdom."

This is Gurewitz's succinct summation of the period of turmoil during which he left Bad Religion to oversee Epitaph as it became the most successful independent rock label in history, thanks to the Offspring's multiplatinum third album, 1994's *Smash*. During the same period, there was a growing rift between Gurewitz and the rest of Bad Religion. Gurewitz was rumored to be unhappy that the band wanted to sign with Atlantic, after more than a decade with Epitaph. In 1994, he decided to quit. "I thought I was leaving the band because me and Jay got into a fight, but I was using that as an excuse," he says. "Because I was too chickenshit to say I had to leave to guide my record company through a really explosive period."

Epitaph's finances were in disarray, a victim of too-rapid growth and Gurewitz's hubris. Gurewitz found success hard to handle, especially once he and the Offspring, who'd known each other for years, began to argue over the band's contract. In 1996, the Offspring left Epitaph to sign with Sony, and reports began to surface that Epitaph was in serious trouble. After getting his life in order—these days, the drug-free Gurewitz spends a lot of time working out, meditating, and playing chess—he managed to get Epitaph back on track.

It was only a matter of time before Bad Religion, who'd also had mixed experiences with the punk gold rush, invited him back. And it was only natural that he invite them back to Epitaph.

Now that Bad Religion are all there for each other, the question remains: Who will be there for Bad Religion? This is clearly a band who walk it like they talk it. Consider the Bad Religion Research Fund, a trust established by the band to fund high school and college students working in the natural and social sciences. So far, the fund has doled out three awards of between \$3,000 and \$5,000; Graffin personally reviews the proposals himself. As a bonus, recipients have the opportunity to get on the guest list to any Bad Religion show for life.

Of course, a scholarship here and there doesn't necessarily make up for the credibility hemorrhage the band suffered after its Epitaph defection. A punk band named Your Mother recorded a song called "Color Me Badd Religion," which includes the line "All harmony makes big money." The even-punkier band Dead Silence released an EP called *Hell, How Could We Make Any More Money Than This?* (a snarky play on the title of Bad Religion's 1982 debut, *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*), which came with an activity book that included the following puzzle: "Bad Religion is having an ethical problem signing to a major label—can you help them?" And the band's recent opening gigs for the likes of Blink-182 have received a mixed reception at best. Referring to the band's large-by-punk-standards six-piece lineup, one skeptical kid at a recent show was heard to remark, "What are they—a ska band?"

Bad Religion take the ribbing in stride. "I wrote a song on the new album called 'Supersonic,' about how the pace of cultural change has accelerated," Gurewitz says. "The nostalgia cycle has shrunk. It's hard to keep in mind how to retain relevance."

After 12 albums and 22 years, do Bad Religion have a snowball's chance in Orange County of sounding relevant? Gurewitz simply points to *The Process of Belief*, a record that still makes him stare dreamily at the CD player even though he's heard it a million times. This is the record Bad Religion have waited years to make. And these guys hate waiting.

"It's the restless nature Brett and I have," says Graffin. "It's hard for us to sit still. When we finish writing a song, we revel in its glory for about 20 minutes. And then it's time to write a new song. And do a better job than before." ■