

CALS NEWS

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Cornell University

Evolution Revolution: Punk Rocker Is Now CALS Lecturer

Greg Graffin, lead singer of and songwriter for the renowned punk rock band Bad Religion, is spending some time with a quieter audience here on campus.

BY BETHANY LIEBIG '12

In between jaunts to Jakarta and South America to perform before thousands of punk fans, Greg Graffin, MS '02, PhD '03, can be found in Warren Hall, where his microphone has been replaced with a lectern and his audience of 60 rapt undergraduate students has gathered to hear him preach about evolution instead of revolution.

The Bad Religion singer has traded T-shirts and badges for tweed and ties in his new role as Cornell lecturer.

Famous for leading the punk rock revival of the early 1980s, Graffin says he was always a bit of a "science nerd." The California native came to Cornell to pursue a Ph.D. in zoology, which he received in 2003. He fell in love with the Ithaca area and now has a home among the gorges, where he likes to escape the hustle and bustle of his hometown of Los Angeles to be inspired by nature.

"I consider it a great privilege and an amazing bit of luck that we [Bad Religion] are as well known as we are today," Graffin says. "But I never leveled with myself that it was as intellectually satisfying as any academic pursuit. Being able to lecture and to participate in the conversation that goes on in science, professionally, is a great privilege."

Now he wants to inspire the next generation to think critically and creatively, with open minds that challenge commonly held assumptions in a way that can contribute to informed social discourse. As he writes in his new book, *Anarchy Evolution*, "That's ultimately why it's so important to know about evolution: because it can change the way we think about ourselves and the world around us."

Graffin says his artistic side complements his scientific side, and both entail creativity. "True creativity surprises us because it doesn't obey the rules," he says. "It comes out of nowhere. Like when you study the fossil record and find species that once existed but don't seem to obey the laws of biology."

The course, Evolution (BIOEE 2070), was taught for many years by recently retired College of Arts and Sciences professor, Will Provine. A new version is being taught by Graffin along with Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (E&EB) professor Richard Harrison, Ph.D. '77. It teaches the basic science of evolution to nonbiology majors, using modern case studies to illustrate how the science is applied and interfaces with real-world questions. The tag-team teachers are addressing issues such as genetics, personalized medicine, drug and pesticide resistance, climate change, and the importance of biodiversity in this semester's maiden class, which reached capacity almost immediately.

Graffin's background is a striking contrast to Harrison, an evolutionary



Credit: Kuu Jelle

Dual personas: Graffin as rocker and as professor



geneticist and East Coast native who has stuck with the Ivies for his entire career—undergraduate degree from Harvard, Ph.D. from Cornell, and nine years teaching at Yale before returning to Ithaca in 1986.

"We come from rather different backgrounds and have different expertise, but we seem to be compatible," Harrison says. "Our hope is there may be some public exchanges between us in front of the students."

He hopes to mold the course into one of the most popular on campus.

"Many of us in the E&EB department felt that a non-major's evolutionary biology course was a particularly critical course since evolution is obviously controversial in the eyes of the general public," said Harrison. "We really want to reach a broader audience of people who aren't biologists, but hopefully will go out, having learned about evolution, and be able to speak about it coherently and cogently when they get into the real world."

Graffin, whose initial appointment is for three years, said he would enjoy expanding his lecturing duties beyond evolution.

"Outside of this department, I have been thinking it would be fun to teach an interdisciplinary course with the music or art department about the history of punk music," he said. •

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Anarchy Evolution

