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BAD RELIGION



PHOTO: KRK

I don't think any sort of long-winded introduction is in order. Bad Religion have been dishing out one album after another of melodic hardcore for years, now. With its long-standing lineup of Greg Graffin (vocals), Brett Gurewitz and Greg Hetson (guitars), Jay Bentley (bass) and Pete Finestone (drums), Bad Religion concoct a heady combination of powerful music with intellectually-stimulating lyricism. In addition, Brett's been busy with production work at his own West Beach Studios and running Epitaph Records, who, besides being the home for BR's albums, have kept up a busy release schedule, with albums from the likes of Insted, Pennywise and Down By Law in recent months. I interviewed Brett and Greg backstage at the Marquee in NYC...Jack Rabid (from *Big Takeover*) added a few comments, as well...

SV: So what's this big punk rock riot you were in the middle of not too long ago?

Brett: We had a show and it was to be at the North Hollywood Theatre, which had a capacity of approximately 1300 and when we approved the venue, we saw there were seats from the back wall to the stage and we said we'll agree to play here on the condition that you remove several rows of seats in front. The promoters said they would. To make a long story short, when we arrived at the North Hollywood Theatre, the seats were in, they had not been removed. They gave us some flimsy excuse about why they had not been removed and we said, OK, we're gonna play but there's gonna be trouble here. You can't expect this to go smoothly because our audience will never sit down in seats. Then, what happened was, the theatre had a capacity of 1300 and they put 1800 in there. Then the fire marshal came and counted the people inside. They had everyone take

a seat and when every... did, there were still people in the aisles, so it was obvious that the place was way over capacity. I put most of the blame on the fire marshal, because what he did next was pull the plug on the show. And that was after only 1 band had played. There were only 3 bands that night, but most of the people came because Bad Religion was playing and they pulled the plug on the show and everyone was pissed off. What could the fire marshal have been thinking? 1800 teenagers with hormones coursing through their veins on several ounces of beer, each, ready to see an exhilarating show, paying too much for it, in the first place and then, tough shit, you don't get to see it, go home, basically. Whoever thought that was a good idea is to blame and that's the fire marshal. A couple of the reports said it's our fault, but that's ludicrous, because we never even played.

SV: Do you really think it's important for the band to maintain some control over situations like that?

Brett: Well, yeah. We were naive. We did everything verbally. We've always done everything on a very grassroots level, but it looks like maybe, now, we're becoming too big to do that, because, in a situation like that, something as simple as not taking the seats out and overselling the venue can cause a lot of trouble.

SV: Do you find it really hard to handle the amount of records you must move? Would you ever consider an offer from a larger label?

Brett: Well, I want to stay independent. The DIY ethic is what we've always been all about and, to answer the first question, do I find it hard, yes, I find it extremely hard, but it's a labor of love, first of all and, second of all, hopefully, in the future I won't have to do everything myself. Right now, Jay is also running Epitaph with me. We sell our

records inexpensively and we just took a new building, so we run on a shoestring budget. We don't put our records inexpensively, either. We make sure that they're quality products. We try to make sure they sound good, look good, and they all have lyric sheets. There's not a lot of money there, but we've got a lot of friends who have said that they're willing to come and work at Epitaph and receive not a lot of money—we pay 'em what we can—and maybe learn about indie label business. So, we're going to try to get a group of people to help out in the future. But, yeah, right now it's really rough.

Greg: I like the do it yourself aspect, because then you reap the benefits—not necessarily monetarily, but also you reap the benefits in terms of putting out a product you can feel proud of and you have control over, so I like that aspect but what I don't like is sometimes, when you're independent, people don't give you as much credit as being an important band. I think clearly that's wrong in the case of Bad Religion.

SV: Let's go back in history a ways. After "How Could Hell Be Any Worse," there was an album called "Into The Unknown" and, after that, "Back To The Known." What made you guys decide to go back to playing a basic hardcore style again?

Brett: Well, that's a 2 part question, but I think it's a loaded question. First of all, I don't think what we play is a basic hardcore style. It's kind of a sore spot for me. Quite often, I don't think we get the credit we deserve by the press because they say, Bad Religion, they're an atavism, they're a throwback to the 80s, they're just doing the same old thing that was created 11 years ago. You take the record "Against The Grain" and you compare it to any hardcore record that was made in 1980. I defy you to find one that sounds remotely like that, with

those type of melodies, with those type of modal, folk-based chord progressions, with soaring vocals that Greg Graffin is responsible for and even Husker Du wasn't like that, and that was after 1980. That was '85. So, our stuff is not basic hardcore. It's true, you might be able to call it generic Bad Religion because we haven't really strayed from our sound, that much but if you do compare "Against The Grain" to "How Could Hell Be Any Worse," you will find that they're quite different. But the thing is, they've evolved gradually from album to album, with the exception of the 2 that you mentioned.

SV: No, you're right, there's a lot more melody than on "How Could Hell."

Brett: And even on "Against The Grain," I think there's a lot more diversity than there was on "Suffer." We tried to do a little more interesting guitar work, we tried to do a few more different tempos. We're not virtuosos, we're not great musicians, so within the realm of what we're capable of playing, we're trying to evolve and grow. But I'm not fucking Yngwie Malmsteen. I'm trying my hardest to try to develop, but I'm not a great guitar player. I'm fairly neanderthal. So what made us go back to it? I guess the real question would be what made us do that in the first place.

SV: Yeah, what made you do that in the first place, because "Into The Unknown" sounded like a different band.

Brett: Well, first of all, the only 2 Bad Religion members on that record were me and Greg, so it wasn't entirely a Bad Religion record. We kept the name because we were the songwriters, but I'm not really sure what made us do that. It's kind of like asking someone what made you do things you did when you were 16 years old. That's how old we were. We've been doing this for 3 decades now and we're not that old. Greg's 26 years old...Jay's 26, Pete's 26. So you're saying what made you do that when you were 16 years old. Didn't you do some fucking weird-ass shit when you were 16 years old? I don't know. To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what I was thinking when we did that. It was like, let's do this, this is funny. I don't really know and I regret doing. We realized it was a blunder I think halfway through doing it, but, at that point, we said, let's just take it to fruition and, as a result, we faded into obscurity, virtual obscurity, tried to come back with "Back To The Known" and it did fairly well and the, basically, we all went different ways. I became a real bad junkie, Greg devoted himself to his studies. Greg Hetson had the Circle Jerks to trade on. We all went our different ways and one thing led to another for us to come back with "Suffer." But it wasn't calculated, like "let's sound like this, now, let's write some songs" and we snapped out those 15 songs in probably 2 months.

SV: How did you manage to overcome your personal problems with the heroin?

Brett: Well, it's a long story. I basically hit bottom and had a couple of near-death experiences and that snaps someone back to reality and I just decided I didn't want to die. Basically, abstaining is what saved my life. I'd been trying to moderate my usage for several years and it never worked and I decided, okay, I have to abstain. And when I started abstaining, my life turned around. After I saw that, I saw no reason ever to go back to it. Since I stopped, my life is everything I ever wanted. I have a wife who I love, she's pregnant with my child right now, my record label is very successful at putting out records that I like, my recording studio is booming because of the success of our records. I'm living my life and I can't even believe it's my life because it's too good.

SV: I saw a letter to the editor, recently, I can't remember if it was *Elipside* or *MRR*, and they said they saw your production credit on the Skid Marks' record and felt it was being treated as the main selling point of the record and they thought it wasn't cool.

Brett: Yeah, but I don't charge people to produce their records. It's all because I love the music and if I'm engineering their record anyway and they say, will you produce, well what does that mean? That's means I'll give 'em ideas, I'll give 'em feedback and opinions, I'll mix it and then they say can we put your name on as producer and I say OK and, then, later, that record came out and it had a big sticker on the front, produced by Brett of Bad

Religion. It's flattering, I don't mind it, but I think they're selling themselves short, because I don't think that's what's good about the record.

SV: Do you usually search out the bands you want to work with, do they search you out or a little bit of both?

Brett: Well, as far as bands for Epitaph, I'm searching and as far as my studio, it's just word of mouth. We don't advertise, I don't look for people, they just find us and book the studio time. We're open to the public. We don't do only punk rock. We get country music, all different ends of the spectrum.

SV: I'm probably generalizing here, but your lyrics are sort of esoteric, use a lot of big words. Do you think that your audience might have a difficult time dealing with your lyrics because of the high level of sophistication and maybe they might miss the point of the lyrics because of that?

Brett: Well, of course, some people might miss the point but I think that what's good about our lyrics is that we're not insulting the intelligence of our listeners. Perhaps we might be challenging their intelligence, but I don't think that that's necessarily always the case and I hope to think that a Bad Religion listener is a higher caliber of listener than say, someone who listens to "Cherry Pie" by Warrant. On "Against The Grain," I tried to tone down the use of polysyllabic words.

SV: I mean, I'm a college graduate and even I was having trouble with some of your lyrics.

Brett: I only write half the songs I did tone down the use of the polysyllabic words on my songs. However, Greg did not, so it's not real easy to notice the change there.

SV: Well, Greg's the PhD candidate in the band.

Brett: Well, that doesn't mean anything. His vocabulary's not better than anyone else's. I mean, if you look at my songs, "Anesthesia," "Walk Away," "Turn On The Light"—"Turn On The Light" has a few big words, but not a lot, "Digital Boy." I tried to make it more down to earth. On "No Control," I got completely out of hand (laughter). I used like every word I knew.

Jack: It was like a game of Scrabble.

Brett: Even on "Suffer" I did. "The anechoic nebula rotating in my brain is persuading me contritely to persist." But I think you can be concise and challenging without being quite so grandeloquent.

Greg: I don't think it dilutes anything because things can be powerful and still use words that are...it's hard to say...I don't like to imply that something is flowery or extraneous, because a lot of our words aren't extraneous, they're carefully thought out and we only use those words that best describe what we're thinking. A lot of our songs pack a lot of thought into relatively short phrases, so I don't think the power of the message is sacrificed. Whether or not people can understand it, that's why it's so great that there's a blend between the lyrics and the music because you can get a good idea of what the song is saying just from listening to the music, so I guess the answer is, no, I don't think they lose too much. The chorus is usually pretty easy to understand and that's the root of the song.

SV: Greg, what are you doing your PhD work on, anyway?

Greg: I'm working on the earliest vertebrates, the earliest backboned animals. I'm working at Cornell University, but my field area is in some rocks that are in Colorado and these rocks are the oldest rocks that contain little fragments of vertebrate bone. It's the first appearance of bone on the planet, so I'm studying little fragments of bone that are still relatively well-preserved and you can tell a lot about the microstructure of the bone in the earliest vertebrates. Bone is an essential tissue in all vertebrate animals, so I'm trying to trace the evolution of bone. Ask some questions like was it's function early-on similar to its function now. Clearly it's not, because early on, bone covered the outside of the organisms and now bone is found only inside, as an endoskeleton. But, in other terms, some of the biological and physiological aspects of it, as a calcium store, a place where we can reclaim it when our calcium levels are low, those kind of physiological aspects was probably the same kind of function in the earliest vertebrates and I want to look at the mechanism on how those worked and try to under-

stand more of how it came to work in us.

SV: Some of your songs seem to take a dim view of mankind, of the human condition. What do you think causes that? Why does mankind suck?

Brett: I think, perhaps, we're an evolutionary anomaly. It's not our fault, but I don't think that there's anything we can do.

Jack: (interjecting a comment on the band's verbosity) I just look up the words in the dictionary. If there's a word I don't understand, I just look it up. I go through your lyric sheet with a dictionary and write down all the words I don't know.

Brett: That's what I do when I read books. That's how I get my vocabulary.

Jack: I told you when I saw you in December I've added anthropocentric (sp?) to my list of words I now understand that I didn't before.

Brett: How about anthropomorphic?

Jack: You've got to give them to me one at a time.

Brett: An anthropomorphic god would be a god that looks like man, because they say man is made in god's image.

Jack: It sounds like something you'd give to a guy when he's suffering.

Brett: But I think that the way we present our opinions is a lot less judgmental. It's perhaps a little too cynical and fatal. But it becomes less preachy that way. It's like, this is no one's fault but this is tragic.

SV: So you're commenting on it rather than accusing anyone.

Brett: No, we're not accusing anybody. Do you want to hear an interesting anecdote? There is an animal which is now extinct called the Irish elk, but it existed not too long ago and it had extremely large antlers and it evolved these antlers for different reasons, but it evolved them for usage in mating rituals because the males would fight for the female's attention, so the strongest male would get a female. So the antlers of these Irish elks grew larger and larger in the natural course of evolution, to the point where they no longer were a benefit to the Irish elk. They became a hindrance. And they evolved such large antlers that these Irish elk could no longer feed. So they all died off. Well, I think that, perhaps, the human brain is a good parallel to the Irish elk's antlers. It's an experiment of evolution gone awry and perhaps it's going to be the thing that causes our extinction as a species. And I think that's kind of an underlying theme of many of our songs.

SV: Is it the evolution or de-evolution of the brain that's going to cause the extinction?

Brett: The de-evolution of the brain is what could save us, but I don't think de-evolution has ever happened in history, except, perhaps, with Devo's records. But they predicted that from the beginning. They had to keep getting worse! That's their whole theory.

SV: I don't know. I see some of the actions going on around me today and I think we are reverting to a neanderthal state.

Brett: Well, I don't know. I just think we're becoming more and more human...

Greg: I don't know. I don't really hate myself. If I hate the species, I'd have to hate myself and I think man, as a species, is pretty interesting because it's so multi-faceted. The fact that we're half biology and half culture is pretty interesting. I was going to say, off the top of my head, that it comes from the cultural side, but that's not true. It seems like the greed and all of the negative things associated with that is something that's deeply rooted in both our biology and culture and if you wanted to change the course of mankind, you'd have to change something very fundamental, and I don't think that's possible. So, basically, in the long run, I'm saying mankind sucks because there's something very deep and inherent that we don't understand about our biology and our culture that drives us in the course that we're headed.

SV: We don't have control over it.

Greg: Exactly. Hence the song "No Control." It's hard to get at why, because people don't understand enough about human biology or human culture so I'm not sure why the species sucks but I know it's a crucial part of our existence. But I don't hate it.