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B a d Religion



L to R: Greg Hetson, Bobby Schayer, Jay Bentley, Brett Gurewitz, Greg Graffin

Adversity & Evolution

B a d Religion are still vocal and questioning on their seventh recording **Recipe For Hate**. Jo-Ann Greene skips the dollar showing of **Jurassic Park** to pick the brains of the role models for the '90s.

Bad Religion vocalist Greg Graffin is confused. "You're calling me enigmatic? I guess you mean that as a compliment?"

Yes, I do. And I can't think of a better word for someone who is pursuing a doctorate in zoology, while playing in a punk band during breaks. As for his specialty, evolutionary biology, I envision him bringing *Jurassic Park* to life.

"No. I work with fossils much older than that—early vertebrates."

My guess of shrimps is equally wrong. "Those are *invertebrates*," he responds. "I

work with the earliest fish, looking at bits of bone under a microscope. It's really pretty boring."

So, what's someone like Graffin, with such esoteric interests, doing in a band like *this*? The answer is simple. "Most people in academia are autistic," he says. "Autistic children don't function in society, and most academics don't either. That's the one thing wrong with it; most academics are so self-absorbed. Bad Religion is an outlet."

Some outlet! Bad Religion are one of America's longest running punk bands, formed back in 1980. There's been some line-up changes over time, and a break while Graffin attended school in Wisconsin, but since 1984 they've been a steady force. *Recipe for Hate*, their seventh album, is easily their most powerful yet.

Brimming with cerebral delicacies, issues as diverse as the destruction of the environment, homelessness, blinkered nationalism, and old-time preachers, the album also contains some of the strongest hooks you'll ever hang your Kalishnikov on. I stumble over the word "commercial," before guitarist Brett Gurewitz supplies "accessible" as a more appropriate term. "It's not *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*" Graffin interjects, referring to the band's '82 debut, "but it's recognizably Bad Religion. It's easier to digest."

Gurewitz adds that it was not by design. "Greg and I really didn't discuss what we were going to write beforehand. We didn't even map it out in a general way. We wrote the songs, listened to them, and then wondered if we should

play them in Bad Religion, because it didn't sound like anything we'd ever written before. Then again, I don't think anything is totally out of context; if you liked any of our previous albums, chances are you'll like this one also."

Graffin feels it's his best songwriting to date. "As a songwriter you're always struggling with your progress," he says, "it's hard for each record to come up with something new and exciting, working within the confines, but this album I had a lot of fun doing."

Which is partially because they invited some of their friends along for the ride. Concrete Blonde's Johnette Napolitano was an old friend whose singing Graffin loves. "Struck a Nerve" finally gave him the opportunity to duet with her.

As for Eddie Vedder, he had showed up pre-Pearl Jam backstage at a Religion

gig. Two years later, he reappeared again, when Pearl Jam and Religion played a German festival together. This time he and Graffin stayed in touch. When *Recipe for Hate* was being recorded and Vedder happened to be in town, it seemed natural to invite him in to sing some back-ups.

But even if the music is more accessible, their vision hasn't softened over time, and that's another reason I find Graffin particularly enigmatic. Shouldn't he be majoring in political science?

"I wouldn't say I'm extremely politically aware—aware of our culture maybe. That's what we always strived to do in the band—address issues that make people think. To me the punk movement was about sharing ideas. As we got older, it was natural for us to raise relevant issues and ask a lot of questions."

But have they found any answers? "Nope, the older I get the more questions there are." Depressing thought. Does he at least think he's had some effect? "I honestly have no idea if we're having an effect, I can't gauge it."

After all these years, Bad Religion must have had some influence, but Graffin thinks not. However, with some careful questioning about his backstage meetings with fans, fan mail, and more, Graffin finally recognizes the significance of his contribution. "I was in total denial, but we *have* had an effect. We have made people think," he replies, sounding undeniably more cheerful now.

Guitarist Brett Gurewitz, in contrast, has none of Graffin's doubts. "I definitely think we've had an effect, as a role model if nothing else," he says. "I know I'm a positive influence. I'm someone who has a certain amount of freedom in his life, so people see me as someone who can be vocal and cynical about their community and country, who can overcome adversity, and be moderately comfortable in their own skin."

And of course there's his role in Epitaph, their self-owned label which Gurewitz works hard at making a "model company." Besides providing good benefits, parental leave and sick pay, Gurewitz adds, "It's a place where the lowest paid and highest paid are very close in their salaries, and everyone has freedom of expression. My goal is to show what can be done within the confines of our system."

A laudable goal indeed, but has he found any answers to the larger questions the band has raised?

"We need more rioting," says Gurewitz. "I think urban terrorism is pretty much the way to go." And when I point out that it had little effect in L.A., he replies, "They stopped too soon. Another month would have done it."

I'm in total agreement, but wonder if that means that violence is the only solution. "No, no," he quickly retorts, "I'm

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actually against violence."

You're suggesting *peaceful* rioting, then?

"I'm against violence, but as a last resort, I'm not against it."

So have we reached the last resort? Gurewitz pauses as he considers my obviously loaded question.

"I won't answer that unequivocally, but I think there are some people who need to stand up for themselves, let's put it that way. I think there are groups that need to stand up and get noticed, by whatever means necessary." Gurewitz won't be drawn any further, laughingly suggesting I'm trying to subvert him. I don't think that is possible.

Well, have you ever wanted to have a more concrete effect on society than simply playing music?

"Yes," he immediately answers, but

there's a very long pause while he considers how. "Pretty much the only way to do that and be effective is to participate in subversive acts. I don't know if I really want to elaborate on that in a magazine though. I've already got an FBI file. I don't know if I want it to become any longer. Let's just say I want to wait until my [two-year-old] son goes to college."

Twenty years is a long time.

"Yeah, but it's no fun having your daddy being a terrorist." Then he pulls himself up short. "That's enough, I think you're being a bad influence."

How do you feel about working within the political system?

"I think it's great for people to be active politically within their community and in humanitarian pursuits. I wish I spent more time doing that."

Does he see himself as the next

Sonny Bono (mayor of his town) then?

"I'm not Sonny Bono," he replies. "I'm actually a lot closer to Cher!"

Is your hair that long?

"No, but my nose is."

And as for the jewel in the navel?

"That can be arranged."

As for politics outside the community level, neither Graffin nor Gurewitz hold out much hope. "You can look at the Soviet Union, their change didn't come through political means," says Gurewitz. "They changed much more radically than this country ever has, and I think ever will. And, interestingly, this is a country that is perceived to have more freedom. Can you imagine something of that magnitude happening here? I can't imagine it in a thousand years. *That's food for thought.*" ■