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YOU'VE SEEN THE NAME, HEARD THE BUZZ, BUT WHO THE HELL ARE...

BAD RELIGION?

They've been stigmatized as Hardcore Metallers, but think they're more in the Softcore vein, as Hugh Hackett discovers.

YOU'D THINK that more people would know who the Californian five-piece Bad

Religion are and where they're coming from. After all, they sell masses of records and have sold out every show they've played in England. Yet outside of a devoted following no-one seems to have heard of them, and those that have know next to nothing about them.

Formed in 1980 by two 15-year-olds, vocalist Greg Graffin and bassist Jay Bentley, along with six-stringer Brett Gurewitz (then 17), they swiftly emerged as what Gurewitz calls "an authentic garage band". A six-track EP was recorded and is now a highly sought-after collector's item.

"It did real well for what it is," recalls Gurewitz, "so we did our first LP in 1982 called 'How Could Hell Be Any Worse', which some considered a classic of the genre, namely Californian-style Hardcore".

For various reasons the next six years saw them release only another EP, but in 1988 they put out their second album 'Suffer' which, as Gurewitz explains, proved an important landmark. "With the release of 'Suffer' it seems we were re-discovered in Europe, and became extremely popular in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Holland. It's hard to gauge our popularity in England, though we just sold out the Astoria."

Indeed, the latest album 'Generator' (also featuring guitarist Greg Hetson and sticksman Bobby Schayer) had pre-release orders in Germany of over 50,000 as an import, making an unprecedented appearance in the national top 50, whilst the Bad boys are big enough to have headlined over the likes of Mudhoney, Pearl Jam and L7. So, why haven't they done the same in Blighty?

"In England I think we've been stigmatised by the fact that the few people who have heard of us have heard of us as a Punk band," offers Greg Graffin "and people come to see us under that assumption."

"I think," continues Gurewitz, "that our music has evolved to the point of our lyrics becoming more sophisticated and our melodies and harmonies becoming pretty interesting, and it's not fair to call us a

Punk or Hardcore band. As Greg said, it's a stigma and I think we can overcome it. There's nothing wrong with Punk, I love Punk, but I think we've changed into something else".

"We could start up a whole new genre if we could only come up with a good name for it," laughs Graffin.

"Softcore!" proposes Jay Bentley.

DESPITE THE light-hearted nature of the bassist's suggestion, it's not at all inappropriate for Bad Religion's unlikely alliance of impossible speed and instantly memorable tunes, combined with a highly intense off-misunderstood and unappreciated lyrical stance, to have been described by Raw's Phil Alexander as "An annoying heart on the sleeve of sincerity". Gurewitz, however, will have none of it.

"We sing songs about the problems of teenage pregnancy, about problems in our local community, and we might even do another song asking questions about God. That's not wearing your heart on your sleeve, I think we're just striving to have lyrics that are relevant or meaningful in some way.

"Philosophically, our lyrics have always been thought-provoking, not preachy," contends Graffin. "The essence of Bad Religion is to be stimulating, not to tell people what to do. That's the way I live my life, and I hope it's reflected in my songs."

To some it's an overly serious approach, bereft of humour, but to believe that is to be guilty of misinterpreting the underlying sarcasm in much of the lyrics, or the very subtle and sly wit that emerges at gigs. These attitudes are often misconstrued as excessive solemnity.

"I understand what you mean," begins Bentley, "because when you read the text and you don't know the band you might think 'Here comes those guys again', then we come out of the club falling over with hysterical laughter, and it's like 'You guys aren't in the band', but I've seen bands who have a much lighter text than us and take themselves very seriously, and it's boring to watch".

This is something that could never be said about the Bad Religion live experience, but with substantial outside interests (Greg is studying for a PhD and lectures at Cornell University, whilst Brett runs the Epitaph label) they have been restricted to just three shows over here - all

in London and all heavily packed out. This was to have been rectified in late July with a brief sojourn, but this was blown out, with the blame apportioned to poor planning, although Graffin is honest enough that ticket sales at London's Town and Country Club were "very horrible", and they offer sincere apologies to those hoping to see them. Also reported was the band's appearance at the forthcoming Reading Festival, but Gurewitz grimly says "That's what we were told, and it turns out our agent lied". Is he still your agent then? "No!" booms Bentley.

HOPEFULLY THIS will only prove a minor hiccup towards Bad Religion attaining a higher level of success in the UK, one they richly deserve considering their lack of snobbery which often rears its ugly head in underground music, with Graffin insisting "We have no qualms about the type of people that listen to our music. We've been criticised in Germany for becoming popular and going on record saying that we have no objections to the popularity, because we think that part of the purpose of our music is to have it free and open to anyone who wants to enjoy it".

So what the hell are you waiting for? Get Religious!



Bad Religion: Lyrics of underlying sarcasm abound!