

SCENE

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SON VOLT

Leaving More Than A Trace

★ *Bad Religion*

★ *Afghan Whigs*

★ *Fred Schneider*

★ *Tears For Fears*

Born Again

Bad Religion Deliver The Smart Punk Gospel

by Kimberli Hagelberg



Jay Bentley, Bobby Schayer, Brian Baker, Greg Graffin and Greg Hetson (from left).

A few years back, their faith was questioned. Successfully independent for over a decade, Bad Religion were finally making real money, but were taxing the resources guitarist Brett Gurewitz's label, Epitaph Records, had reserved for developing new artists. With STRANGER THAN FICTION ready to record, the group made the decision to move to Atlantic Records. Gurewitz left the lineup to run Epitaph full time and, suddenly, the band, that guitarist Greg Hetson recalls, "couldn't get arrested for years," wound up on modern rock radio.

It was a fate worse than death for hardcore fans certain their band had sold out. So, how did Bad Religion hang onto success and credibility? Hetson says it wasn't that tough. "We got surprisingly little flack for all the supposed horrible things that we did ... signing with Atlantic, showing our video on MTV. Not that many people were bummed, once they heard the music."

Since the band's debut, 1982's HOW COULD HELL BE ANY WORSE?, and '83's now out-of-print INTO THE UNKNOWN, Bad Religion have managed to weather their share of trials. In the mid-'80s, Hetson, lead vocalist/songwriter Greg Graffin and original drummer Peter Finestone played sporadic gigs to keep the band alive while Graffin completed college. In 1985, while Hetson also kept busy with the Circle Jerks, Bad Religion released the interim six-song EP BACK TO THE KNOWN to rekindled interest. Guitarist Brian Baker (co-writer on four of the new disc's 15 cuts) signed on just before the STRANGER THAN FICTION tour in '94. Gurewitz still has a distant connection through Epitaph, which still sells well from the band's back catalog (SUFFER, NO CONTROL, AGAINST THE GRAIN, GENERATOR, the breakout RECIPE FOR HATE) and the 1995 compilation, ALL AGES.

Touring behind their new release, THE GRAY RACE, Hetson, Graffin, Baker, Jay Bentley (bass) and Bobby Schayer (drums) will play the Agora this Friday, April 26. Call it the art of being casual. Hetson assesses from the vantage point of a 16-year tour veteran. "When the band first started it was like an after-school hobby. It's still like that for us. We don't place too much emphasis on selling 35 million records and playing sports arenas. We don't expect too much — just to do it and enjoy it."

Produced by Ric Ocasek, the new release — completed in a brief month — was created in pretty much the same vein. Virtually everything was recorded as a band.

"Some of the vocals were re-done, but we tried to keep it as live as we could. We haven't done it that way for the last few records, but it's better than making sure the drums are perfect then going back to finish everything else. Ric told us, 'Just play as a unit. Who cares if it's not perfect?'"

"That's the best method for our type of music," I think. It doesn't have to be so precise. This way we play more as a band, and things seem more meshed together. You get

those magical moments," he adds with a laugh.

Written during the second leg of the 1995 tour, the lyrical face of THE GRAY RACE wears a far more serious expression. The release expands on the Bad Religion's trademark driving but upbeat punk aesthetics, braced with terse lyrics. Graffin has honed his flair for delivering cautionary rants about crime, overpopulation and a declining society without a trace of a sneer.

The lyrics are shared sentiments, Hetson explains, noting that the band actually meets to make sure everyone believes Graffin's words. "We're not really out there sup-

"We're not really out there supporting causes. That's really hard to do when you tour as much as we do. We just go out there and yell about what we see is wrong."

— Greg Hetson

porting causes," he says. "That's really hard to do when you tour as much as we do. We just go out there and yell about what we see is wrong. Hopefully somebody will help us out."

They will continue to tour for the next month or so, but Hetson says they won't be joining the Lollapalooza lineup. He gives the nearly universal Internet rumor about as much credence as an Elvis sighting.

"We haven't been asked, but I've heard that. I've also heard we're doing the Warped tour, but we haven't been asked to do that, either."

If the invitation came, would the band fire up the bus? "Probably not, but I better not say that," says Hetson. "The minute I do, we'll end up there. So, who knows?"

During their stop in Cleveland — in the absence of a Tribe home game — Bad Religion could be caught killing a little time at the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame And Museum.

"We haven't been there yet, but we have a guitar in the Hard Rock Hotel in Vegas, so I guess the next step is the Rock Hall," Hetson says with a laugh. Getting serious, he adds, "I really want to see it and make my own decision whether it's a joke or a tribute to the music."

Also planned for the near future is an exploration of the World Wide Web. Though any search engine will turn up 10 or 12 Bad Religion sites [try <http://r2d2.ucsd.edu/br/index.html> to get started], Hetson says they've had spotty luck connecting, even to their own "official site" [http://www.atlantic-records.com/Bad_Religion/], from which they were unceremoniously dumped just yesterday in mid-surf.

"We're in the middle of looking around and nothing. It's insane — and embarrassing to not get any farther than the first page on your own site," he says with a laugh, "but we'll keep trying." With a name like Bad Religion, an appeal to the cyber gods is always an option. Though, given their recent attempt to raise Jimi Hendrix, even that exotic avenue seems doubtful.

"We recorded at Electric Lady, but we didn't see the ghost of Hendrix. We asked him, to come, but he didn't show," Hetson jokes. "We lit the lava lamps and candles, said our chants at the Ouija board — nothing. He must've been out."

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