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Veteran Punks Bad Religion

Assault Bush Administration with The Empire Strikes First

story by Dan Marek
photo by Sean Murphy

Fixed on dominating the country with raucous punk and in-your-face political messages, 24-year music industry veterans Bad Religion have assaulted the current administration with their latest album, The Empire Strikes First. Full of political uproar ("Let Them Eat War"), religious questions ("Sinister Rouge"), and environmental conscience ("Los Angeles is Burning"), the album proves that the group's 2002 release Process of Belief wasn't just a comeback, but a giant red flag waving over the U.S.



Chicago InnerView caught up with guitarist Brian Baker at his home in Washington D.C. - where he says it's "better to keep an eye on the current administration" - to talk about the new album, politics, being in a band with the head of the world's biggest independent punk label (Epitaph) and the band's ever changing line up that has hopefully reached an end.

Chicago InnerView: It's quite an accomplishment that you guys are going on 25 years as a political punk band. Besides outlasting any punk band, you've seen many political bands come and go (not that there have been a lot). What are your top five political bands? Can you even name five?

BAKER'S INNER VIEW

"All and all it really is just a punk rock band, but there is some obligation to try and disseminate information that might help the world. It's a little more interesting to me than what I'm going to do on a Saturday night."

Brian Baker: You know, I don't know if I can. I think that the reason is that a lot of times when bands are flying the political flag, there are a couple pitfalls. One of them is being annalistic, one is an approach of, 'fuck this, fuck that,' as opposed to, 'how can we be less fucked?' And number two is that it is very hard to, if you write a song that says 'Gerald Ford is a son of a bitch' and you get on stage 14 years later and say, 'Gerald Ford is a son of a bitch',

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it just doesn't resonate. I think that Bad Religion's politics are, I don't want to say less specific, but I think the manner in which we write and the way the things are delivered gives it that sort of longevity. When you try to touch on key issues, global issues that will always be something of concern, it still works 20 years down the road.

Chicago Innerview: A lot of kids coming out to see the Warped Tour may be seeing Bad Religion for the first time. Do you think it's hard to get your message across in such a short set?

Brian Baker: Well, I would prefer to come across as exactly what we are, a very well seasoned, relatively complicated, punk rock band that sings about relevant social issues. I realize that with a 30-minute spot outside on the Warped Tour, it's kind of hard for all of this stuff to sink in for someone who is not initiated. It's one of the reasons we like doing it, because it usually ends up being a first experience for a new Bad Religion guy. And whether or not it all sinks in [during] that 30 minutes, at least the quality of the songwriting and our performance will encourage somebody to run to their computer and illegally download one of our songs, and perhaps start the ball rolling.

CI: What do you think is the best way fans can take your message to the next level and become active?

BB: Well, there's a number of ways. I mean, it's pretty clear from The Empire Strikes First that we are trying to send out an alarm here that now is the time for 18- to 24-year-olds to finally goddamn register and vote. If we have learned anything from the 2000 election, we know that a vote really does count. Just the process of becoming involved and becoming a registered voter would hopefully encourage people to do a little homework and see who they want to vote for. That's one hopeful byproduct you can get from this, if you see our record and see how concerned we are. Of course there are issues that aren't political. One would hope that people would read the lyrics and see what we're singing about and it would impact them if they had environmental issues that they would try and go learn about it, or personal political issues, which we touch upon every record. We are sort of providing something of a guidebook with a good backbeat, but you don't know you can make them read and you do the best you can. All and all it really is just a punk rock band, but there is some obligation to try and disseminate information that might help the world. It's a little more interesting to me than what I'm going to do on a Saturday night.

CI: It's not often that the label head is in the band. Is it weird looking over and having the 'man behind the curtain' on stage with you? Do you think that you get better treatment on the road than other Epitaph bands since [guitarist] Brett [Gurewitz] owns the label?

BB: It's only a positive thing. Well, think about this, when we release a new record, the owner of the label is in the band so if there are problems within the label over promotional issues or who didn't get their free CD, for them second place is a set of steak knives. We're in a pretty great position and it's not awkward at all. Look at NOFX, the owner of their label [Fat Wreck Chords] is their singer and bass player - so no, it doesn't really factor at all, it actually just makes me feel better. I've probably been on 10 or 15 labels and four major labels [Baker has been in a slew of projects including playing bass for Minor Threat] and you can't get better than having the label head 12 feet away from you plugged into an amplifier.

CI: You originally replaced Brett. Was it a surprise to you when he came back?

BB: No, the thing is I was maintaining a good relationship with Brett even when he was not in

the band and was actually in somewhat of an adversarial position with a couple of the other members. Brett was actually party to me being his replacement. Obviously it was [vocalist Greg] Graffin and [guitarist Greg] Hetson that called me first, but it was never an issue. I was always kind of calling for him to participate, which turned out being the case in some sort of punk rock Brian Wilson sort of format - which is really what he does. There was never really a question to whether I was going anywhere and Brett had the grace when they patched up all these old little riffs they had to say, 'well of course you know you're not going anywhere.' That was good to know, because I had become pretty happy with this gig. But it makes complete sense because Brett isn't free to tour like Bad Religion does. We work eight to ten months a year sometimes and Brett is running the biggest independent punk label in the world. He can play about ten percent of the time. It all works out fine. It may sound awkward on paper, but it really is a neat arrangement that we have.

CI: What do you think has been Bad Religion's best accomplishment?

BB: I think the greatest accomplishment has been to remain relevant for 24 years. There is no other punk band that has had this kind of a run. To still be something of interest and have somebody call me from Chicago and ask about the band is a big one. I'd also like to think that we helped educate to some degree.

Bad Religion will play as part of the Vans Warped Tour at the Tweeter Center July 24.

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