

## Greg Graffin of Bad Religion

**W**ith the release of *No Substance*, Bad Religion's 13th full-length album, the seminal punk group continues to live out their reputation as one of the most political and outspoken bands of this generation. In addition to touring, and parenting two young children, singer/songwriter Greg Graffin is a Ph.D. candidate in Evolutionary Biology, as well as a strong proponent of education. The band recently set up a grant for a student of the social or physical sciences who wants to concentrate on field research. During BR's brief stop in Toronto for the Warped Tour, *Chart* sent **Sarah Chauncey** to delve into Greg's brain, checking on everything from politics to the parallels between punk rock and science.

**This is something you've probably been asked a lot with this album: Where can we find substance?**

I think you find substance in social programs. I think you find substance in communities that actually care for one another. I think you find substance in leaders of communities that care for one another.

You don't find it in places where there's runaway population. You don't find it where there's so many people that you can't relate on an individual basis to any of them.

You don't find substance where there's class-based stratification. But I think that the substance I'm talking about is the kind of meaningful interaction with... Social interaction and social organizations that promote the quality of life. And that's why the album sort of talks about all these promotions, but none of them are promoting the quality of life. They're promoting a fantasy of what life could be like, and it's creating a society of dreamers and hoppers. Nobody's satisfied with their way of life.

**How do we get to a society where people care about each other?**

Well, first of all, I don't think you can spend your time thinking about other people's priorities. I just think that you have to lead by example. That's one thing so few politicians do, and it's one thing so few graduate advisors do, and it's the same thing so few entertainers do, is lead by example. And the only way you can really evoke meaningful change in people is to lead by example. There's a microcosm, interestingly, a microcosm of parenting. As our parenting breaks down in society, it leaves a residue that's very damaging to future generations, because nobody has any role models. Nobody is leading by example, so people have to forge their own path.

**There seems to be a bandwagon-politics thing going on, and I wanted to get your take on that.**

Really? I don't [see it]. ▶



ORIGINAL IMAGE BY SHERYL NIELDS

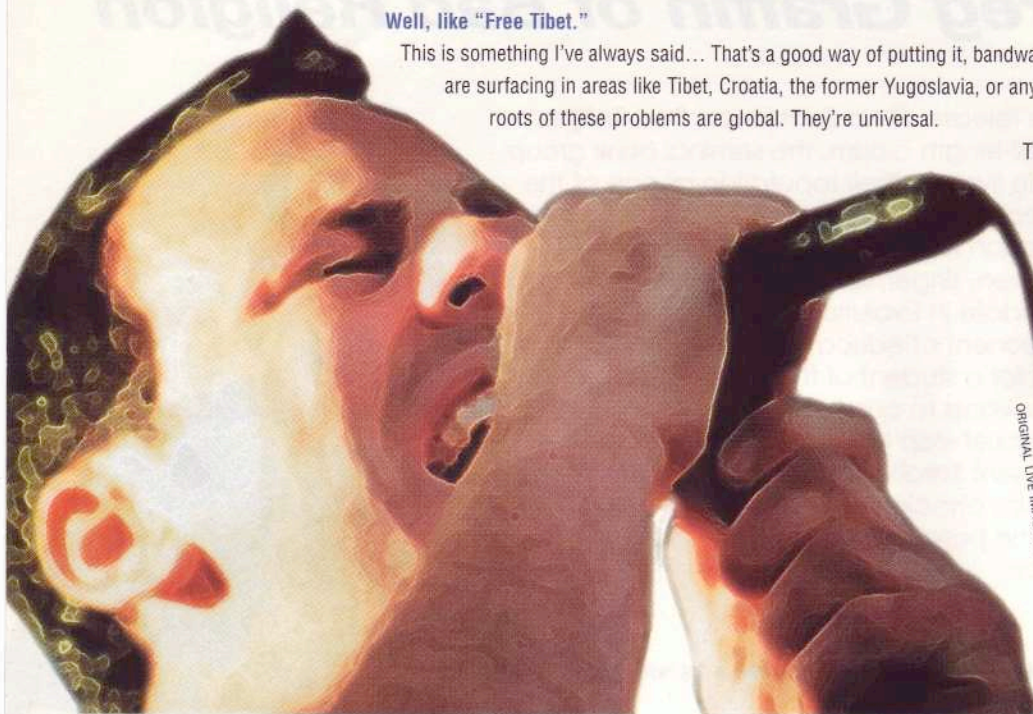
**"Getting a bunch of skateboard kids to say, 'Fuck! Free Tibet!' — it's only the tip of the iceberg. You need to teach, and none of the people who are throwing these benefits have the depth or the insight to teach, to really enlighten people."**

Well, like "Free Tibet."

This is something I've always said... That's a good way of putting it, bandwagon politics. It's like the roots of the problems that are surfacing in areas like Tibet, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia, or any of these places, or in many parts of Africa — the roots of these problems are global. They're universal.

There's something in who we are as people. It's so much more important, and I think that's what I strive to do in Bad Religion, is to raise the awareness of who we are as people, before you can attack any one of these complex issues. Because getting a bunch of skateboard kids to say, "Fuck! Free Tibet!" — it's only the tip of the iceberg. You need to teach, and none of the people who are throwing these benefits have the depth or the insight to teach, to really enlighten people.

Now, by teaching them the word "Tibet," they're doing a service. But I'm very skeptical about how much money they raise, because I know how much a production costs. Those productions are exorbitant, and how much is left over? Where does it go? A lot of



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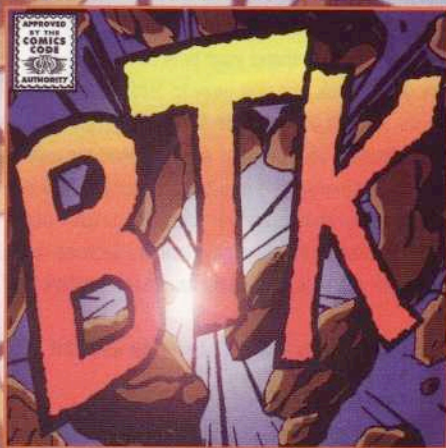
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**On Lilith Fair:** "We aren't deeply analyzing it. We're using just the most superficial criterion, of the fact that everyone onstage has a vagina, and so we therefore think that it's empowering to people with vaginas... I think if that's going to be hailed as a feminist tour that's good for women, then I just think that feminism's in some serious trouble."

**Definitely.**

I'll tell you this, my daughter's four [years old] now, and I'm much more proud to have her stand on stage here at the Warped Tour than I would be at any of those damned shows. Because if you look, there's a great mix of men and women out there, boys and girls. And I think it's easy to write this off as adrenalin-charged boy music, but that doesn't really do it justice, because I think there's a... I don't know how it is here in Toronto; it does differ city to city, but there's a really impressive proportion of women, females, who love this music. Says something about this scene, that it's open and tolerant, not marketed in a way that... I think it's more honest.

**How has being a parent affected your view of both your work and the world?**

I don't really think about it that much when I'm onstage.

[Laughing] Yeah: "Oh no, I forgot to give him a bath!"

I like to have them [my children] watch me onstage. Just to be able to see what it's like, what their dad does, but... I think all it's done is made me recognize that

responsibility is something that, if you take it seriously, you end up changing your behavior. And being... more self-conscious about your actions. And most importantly, recognizing that you have a very significant effect on the people who watch you.

Your children constantly watch you, and in entertainment, people are constantly watching you, too. If you take your job seriously, if you have a goal, you actually modify your behavior, hopefully, and take yourself seriously when you're onstage. Because being a parent is like always being onstage. You slip up, it goes deep into the consciousness of your children.

**Where do you find a balance between — not telling people what to think, but expressing your own personal beliefs, and — well, between being didactic and being more, like, a facilitator of thought.**

Well, that's what I got back to earlier. You've got to be true to yourself, or you can't be a role model. You've got to be true to yourself, or you can't lead by example. And so, when I espouse my opinions, they offend a lot of people. But the people who get offended usually don't recognize them as opinions. They think of it as a statement, but that's where they're wrong. It's very hard, in my history of 18 years of writing, that... Even as a kid, I knew that it's not cool to propose what's right and what's wrong, but rather to question. That's what I've done my whole life, and that's what I want to continue to do. Questioning, you can never get yourself into trouble. Questions are, in themselves, a reflection of what you think. You don't ask the question if you're not thinking of it.

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people are salaried people, making money off these things. I think it's better to do that than to sell cigarettes or to have some sponsor, but let's not use that as the hallmark of our political voice. Hopefully, people will want to learn, and people will emerge that are good teachers.

**I read something you said about how a lot of people just don't have the training, or the background, or the interest, to take something that's very complex and make it understandable. Do you see that as one of your roles?**

Yeah, I think that's a necessary role. I'm a strong believer in reductionism. That is the first step in teaching. I'm not saying that I do that successfully with all my songs — a lot of my songs are just entertainment. But certainly, if my writing is a glimpse inside the way my brain works, it's definitely a reductionist exercise. Most of what we understand in the world is the result of reductionist thinking.

**What's your dissertation topic?**

It's the biology of acellular bone, which is a really unique type of bone tissue in vertebrates. Very little is known about it... That was also the organism I worked on for my Master's degree, when I studied the environment of the earliest vertebrates... [My research] suggested that the earliest vertebrates were freshwater animals, which is the opposite of what most people think. That's why I call it the least-often-cited paper in academic history — because nobody is interested in hearing that.

**So you're controversial, even in academia.**

Definitely. That's what science is all about. There's a lot of parallels in what I do onstage here and what I do in academics.

**What parallels would you draw?**

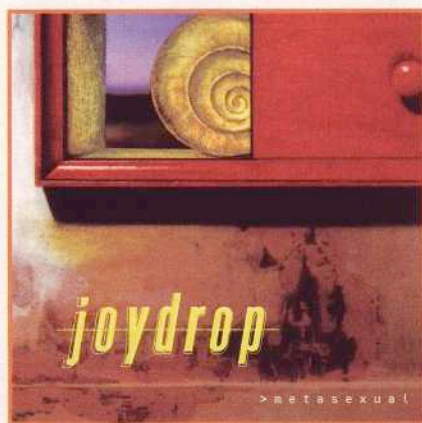
Well, that's one of them. You're always questioning the currently-held dogma and trying to raise awareness that other perspectives might be valid. But in science, you go a step further, and you actually show the evidence that anyone can see with their own eyes, that proves there's a good reason to be skeptical. And that's what I like about science — its universality. The best science is that which can be seen by anyone.

**Is the music scene so de-politicized now that people think, just because Lilith Fair is a tour of women, it's feminist?**

I think that goes hand-in-hand with the concept of no substance. Because we aren't deeply analyzing it. We're using just the most superficial criterion, of the fact that everyone onstage has a vagina, and so we therefore think that it's empowering to people with vaginas.

**Yeah.**

But we're ignoring the fact that these people are backed by so much money, so much marketing money to make them sex symbols, so much production money, to make this a huge, larger-than-life production, to take people onstage away from the audience, distance themselves and make them seem larger-than-life. And it totally ignores any of the substance of what it means to be a woman. If you even listen to the songs, they're not that [political] They're very "me, me, me." They're very personal. I think if that's going to be hailed as a feminist tour that's good for women, then I just think that feminism's in some serious trouble. ▶



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**Right.**

And raising a supposition is a great way to get feedback on what... how appropriate your question is. And that's why I raise questions, is because ultimately, science and Bad Religion itself is a social endeavour, is something that you pursue with other people; hopefully it brings people together around a common theme.

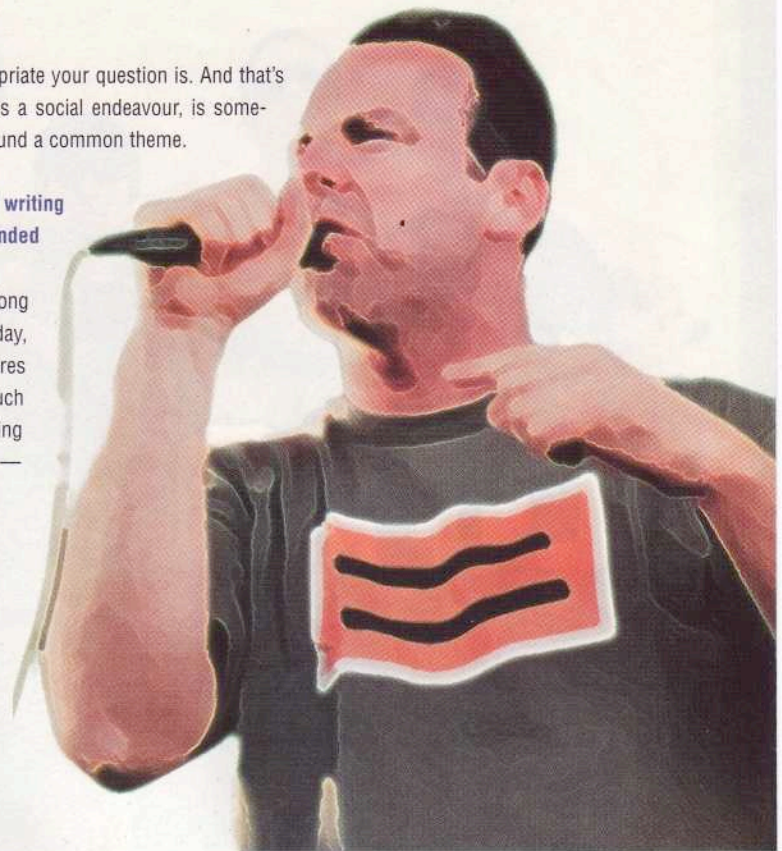
**Sometimes I miss doing something socially meaningful. I love music, and writing about music, but it's not what I studied, and it's certainly not what I ever intended to get into.**

I know how you feel. I question it every day. But you know, someone who was along with me last week made me feel so good, because she said... I mean, every day, when I go out in the tent and meet people and shake their hands and take pictures with them, they all say, "I've been listening to you for so long, you mean so much to me, blah blah." But then one out of a hundred says, "You're the reason I'm going to college." And she made me realize — my friend who was traveling with us — said, "You know, there's a lot of academics who can't say that they've inspired anyone to go to college."

**Exactly. Exactly.**

And so, for me, it's, like, sometimes the things that you do inspire people in ways you don't really think about. And those are what you have to focus on. You can't always look at the immediate results of your work. Sometimes it's the longer-term repercussions from it that are the most rewarding. ◐

*For more information on Bad Religion's Social or Physical Sciences grant program, check out the band's web site at [www.badreligion.com/bt8.html](http://www.badreligion.com/bt8.html).*



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