

Punk re-emerges from underground

Punk rock never died - it simply moved back underground where it stayed until the huge success of the likes of Green Day and the Epitaph Records roster in the past few years. But even while that was going on, there were a plethora of bands that stayed pretty much underground on independent labels, touring their asses off. Good Riddance was one of those bands, and their low-key approach, where the focus was on the music rather than achieving mammoth sales, ensured a very loyal following.

As with just about any band signed to Fat Wreck Chords (Records...get it?), Good Riddance are almost so punk it hurts. In addition to being signed to such an eminent label, they also hail from the home of punk these days - California. Their second album, *A Comprehensive Guide To Moderne Rebellion*, shows off their ability for aggressive songs that actually have something to say - social and political comments feature heavily in most songs, and that is one of the things which makes Good Riddance so very interesting.

When they played in town during the summer, I was really impressed by two things. First, there was the actual live show - they stayed on stage for over an hour (which is almost twice as long as most punk bands can manage), taking requests from the crowd towards the end of their set. And secondly, they are a band with something to say. But not only in their songs - when members of the audience started to toss insults around, the band would take them to task for it, telling them that they should think about what they say. While that sort of attitude coming from an authority figure might be met with an even bigger mouthful of attitude, coming from someone in a punk band, it might get some attention. I asked Russ, the vocalist of the band, just how punk and social responsibility go together.

So how do you get the energy to stay on stage for that long?

Well tonight it wasn't very hot, so that helped. We played a lot longer than we normally do - the crowd was really having a good time, and people paid to see us play, so we like to give them their money's worth.

The band has been around for a long time - about ten years - and that seems to be longer than you'd expect for a punk band.

Yeah - that's as long as I've been in the band. But for a lot of that time, we really weren't serious - we just played at parties around our hometown. The members of the band changed a lot. It wasn't until Luke, the guitar player, joined the band in 1990 that we started getting more motivated. Then we started to get out of town and write more songs, so we've only really been serious for six years.

What have you seen change in the scene during those six years?

Punk has become a whole lot more commercialized, especially in the last couple of years. The corporate-owned media like Rolling Stone, Spin and MTV have taken punk and exploited it, and that makes it really strange because there are people coming to our shows who wouldn't normally have come two years ago.

Was tonight's crowd a typical one? Do you attract a younger crowd?

Yeah, especially in North America. In Europe, older people seem to turn up for the shows.

What do you think it is about punk that attracts youth?

The energy, and the anger...people telling you

what to do, and being sick of it.

Most of your songs seem to feature social commentary that you might not expect from a punk band - is that important to you?

Social commentary in the lyrics is important to me, rather than just singing about girls and beer. The music I got into when I was younger was a lot more political: The Dead Kennedys, Crass - bands like that, so that is what really drives me to write songs. If I'm not writing about a subject that means something to me, it's hard for me to be motivated.

Do you think that anybody is listening to what the band has to say?

Some people do, some people don't. I do care, but what people get out of it is up to them.

Is the commercialization of punk something that really concerns you? I mean, coming from California, you must have seen bands start off small and then jump to major labels and on to fame - is that something that you'd let happen to your band?

Would we sign to a major label? No. We're really happy on an independent label, and an independent label will be there after punk is no longer commercially viable. They will still be around to support us. Major labels who have never had any interest in punk bands before will probably drop all their bands in a year or so - they really are a fair-weathered friend as far as I can see.

If you take the commercialization to the extreme, you get The Sex Pistols reforming after all these years. How do you feel about that?

At least they were honest from the very beginning and said that they only cared about the money. Some bands have had lofty ideals, and sworn up and down that they would never do this or never do that, but when the right amount of money is flashed in their face, they take it. Things like that do punk, as a movement, a disservice and bands that I've had a lot of respect for have done that.

Being on an indie label, you find it so much harder to get publicity. Does that make playing live and word of mouth more important to you?

As far as we are concerned, that is the only way to go. I don't think that punk has any place on commercial radio or MTV. MuchMusic is different to MTV though - I am friends with Al from a Toronto band called Trigger Happy, and he's taught me all about the differences, and how MuchMusic helps Canadian bands get started and compete against all the US bands. That is so important because so many bands from Canada and Europe just get swallowed up by the US, so what MuchMusic does for Canadian bands is pretty cool.

A band like yours tours almost constantly, don't you?

We tour a lot - we do a couple of national tours a year, and we've done Europe twice too.

But do you ever feel like you'll never really 'break through'?

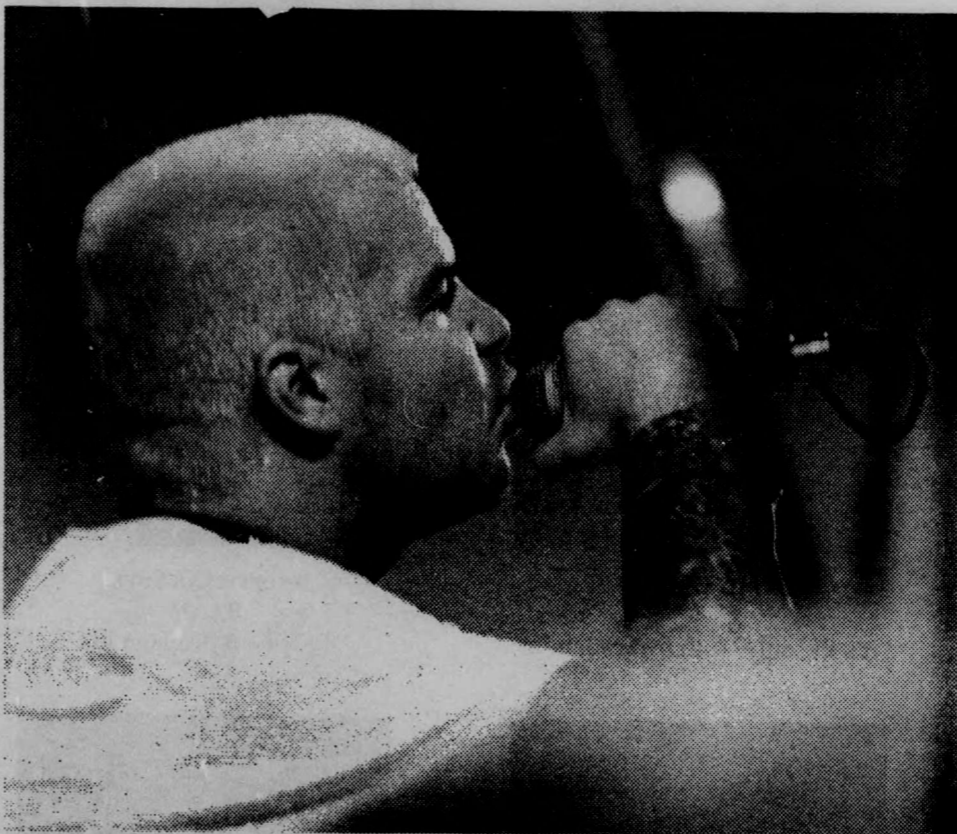
Define 'break through'.

That's the problem - most people equate success for a band simply in terms of financial success. How do you define your idea of success?

Our goal is to play live to people who want to see us, and have enough money to pay our way home. And that's as far as I'd go.

You have no temptation to jump to a major?

First of all, no major wants us. And even if



Russ from Good Riddance on stage at the Farmers' Market, Fredericton.

SCOTT MCFADDEN PHOTO

they did, we wouldn't want to. I've been listening to punk for thirteen years, and I've seen it when major labels didn't want anything to do with punk, and they said that punk was dead. So when you have labels like Epitaph that have been around for about ten years promoting punk music. They are the sort of labels that punk bands should stick with. The major label thing is just temporary - major labels and corporate-owned media take a form of music, completely exploit it until there is nothing left and then throw it away and move to something else. They've done it with rap, heavy metal, speed metal, grunge and they are doing it with punk now. I happen to think that they'll do it to real folk music next with singer-songwriter types, beat it into the ground and rob anything that was good about it.

I've had the feeling for a while that ska was going to be next.

I don't think that ska has a wide enough appeal, even though I do like ska myself. And that's lucky for ska because this way it will always be around and keep its roots.

So there is still very much a punk ethic involved in what you do.

We try to as much as we can. We get called sell-outs because we have t-shirts for sale. People call Fat Wreck Chords a major label, but then can't tell me why. We had a kid in Arizona call us capitalist fascists, and when I asked him why after the show, he couldn't tell me. We're misunderstood sometimes, so when anybody asks us where we stand, I tell them what our ethics are. The more we play, the more records we sell and that means more money, so people have their doubts about us. We do charge money to play

shows, and I don't think it's too much.

Is that why you try to talk to people who shout things like 'faggots' when you are on stage - is education part of your ethic?

A young girl, really drunk spitting out the word 'faggot' - that kind of stuff really burns me. "Get those pussies up here to dance" or "Get those homos up here to dance" really makes it hit home just how backward people can be. It's not that we are so PC that we can tell people what to do - it's not like that at all. Everything that I know, my ideals have been learned - I used to throw the word 'faggot' about. But I had a friend who was gay, and he told me one day that when you attach a bad connotation to that word, you are putting somebody down and you might not even know. I realised that there are so many other words I can use to make fun of my friends without putting other people down. Now I try to be a lot more responsible about what I say. If I can make someone else think about and choose another word then it's worth it.

Does that bother you that there seems to be some kind of social responsibility to being in a band?

Well, there doesn't have to be. There are bands that stand on stage and call people 'faggots'. We're not out to change people's minds, so much as if someone listens to what we have to say and see something from a different angle they haven't done before then we've accomplished something. That's what punk always was to me - thinking about something from a different angle and thinking "Wow - what makes a lot of sense," and having things cleared up. That's what punk is to me.

Selected Discography

1995 - *For God And Country*

1996 - *A Comprehensive Guide To Moderne Rebellion*

(both are full-length albums and are released on Fat Wreck Chords)

