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Q&A: Against Me!'s Tom Gabel on Anarchists, Anti-Abortion Billboards, *Alternative Press* Magazine

By Michael Tedder Fri., Jun. 25 2010 at 8:15 AM

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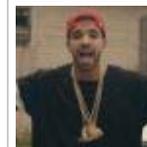


Against Me! leader Tom Gabel is the sort of lyricist that can't stop himself from contemplating the folly of Robert McNamara's foreign policy decisions mid-song, and he's the sort of singer that can find a way to make the former Secretary of Defense's quirky name positively swing. Whether attacking the industrial military complex, morally bankrupt youth culture, or Florida's very existence, Gabel shoves his songs to the brim with words, pushing heady statements into soaring battle cries through sheer force of will.

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Tom is the one in black.

On the Gainesville punks' new album *White Crosses* (their second collaboration with megaproducer Butch Vig and Sire Records), he ups the lyrical density and widescreen melodies even further, attacking religious hegemony and left-wing hypocrisy with tunes that, Dan Weiss wrote in the print *Voice*, will coax out "your chorus-singing impulses." But *White Crosses* has plenty of the group's signature fist-pumping anthems, but they also find time for epic ballads worthy of Springsteen ("Because Of The Shame") and acoustic laments worthy of Westerberg ("Ache With Me").

The Me! men have been through a bit of change recently, with founding drummer Warren Oakes leaving to run a Mexican eatery (he was replaced by former Hot Water Music drummer George Rebelo) and the hyper-active, hyper-mustachioed Franz Nicolay helping them out with keyboards. But the shout-along live shows and all-black wardrobe have remained intact, as has Gabel's down to earth sense of humor. We recently called up Gabel to find out what he's against these days, what it's like to almost pass out on stage and why



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we shouldn't diminish the importance of bassist Andrew Seward's beard.

When you do interviews these days, do you find yourself bracing for the inevitable major label/backlash question?

[Laughs] I definitely think my answers have become well-rehearsed, like it or not.

I wasn't going to bring it up, but I wanted to ask about the first single, "I Was A Teenage Anarchist." Is it fair to say this song is what the hip-hop community might call a "hi hater" moment, were you just rub it in detractor's faces?

I never thought about it like that, but that's pretty cool.

How did that song come about? Was there a moment, back in the day, were you realized that the labels you had put on yourself as the guy who wrote "Baby, I'm An Anarchist!" didn't really apply anymore?

I don't know. I feel like inevitably it's a song that will be kind of misinterpreted, and people are going to take it as some denunciation of past political beliefs, and by no means am I trying to say that at my ripe old age of 29 that I am somehow more conservative in my political views. I think that for me personally I'm in a place where I don't need to subscribe to any kind of labels in order to justify my existence or complete my identity.

I don't know, the song is a true story. I got involved in radical politics at a really young age, and I've had many various different experiences over the years, and in a lot of ways my politics have pretty much stayed the same, it's just more so been the ways that I practice them that has kind of changed. I think that anarchism as a philosophy is something I very much identify with and see a lot of merit in, but the anarchist movement a lot of times I feel like has a lot of short comings and it's full of shit.

Did you feel that way even before people began turning on your band for signing with Fat Wreck Chords years ago?

Oh, for sure. A good incident in regards to that was right after we signed to Fat-I say "signed" but we never actually signed any paper work or whatever-right after we signed with Fat but before our first record was even out with them there was a pretty immediate backlash. I remember we were playing a show on Long Island, I think it was the Polish American Hall or something like that. A fan of the band, I think it was a 16-year-old girl, was the quote-unquote promoter, and I believe it was eight dollars to get into the show, and there was maybe a 100, 200 people there or something like that. There was a bunch of people that we had known from playing on Long Island previously who came to the show,



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just people we assumed were friends or whatever, and as we were playing they started trying physically to stop us from playing, they were taking this big stand. At first we thought they were joking, then we realized they were serious. It was one moment, whatever. We finish the show, pack up and go out to the van and start to drive and then realize that someone had slashed our tires. So, fastforward maybe four or five months after that. We had found out who the person was who slashed our tires, and we were playing a free show, I think somewhere in Brooklyn, I want to say. And the person who had slashed the tires came to the show, and there was a very immature confrontation, on our part I'm sure, that ensued where we were like "You need to pay for our tires, blah blah blah" etc, not that that was ever going to happen. And I remember as we were all yelling back and forth at each other I looked over to my right and one of the kid's friends was standing there and I saw him pick up a brick. I was like "Wow." It was totally this moment that took me back, I realized this person could potentially fucking bash my brains out with a brick, all because I play in a fucking band and signed to a bigger indie label. And this was the movement that I was part of. And realizing that, and realizing how full of shit that all was, was definitely an eye-opening moment.

I read that one time you went to a show, and there was an anti-Against Me! protest.

Yeah, there's been a couple of shows like that over the years. There's been various people who have taken it upon themselves to write columns advocating that people try to stop our shows. I remember in *Maximumrocknroll* some columnist wrote a big tirade how people should pour bleach on our merchandise and stuff like that and "at all cost stop their shows" and it's just kinda bullshit.

Did you ever want to go up to these people and ask "Don't you realize that Mumia Abu-Jamal is still in jail, and factory farming is destroying the environment? You should have bigger things to worry about."

Well, yeah, and it's exactly that. Any time I've seen someone upset over us in that way, it just turns those politics into a joke for exactly those reasons. It's like, "Really? This is the battle you're choosing to fight? Out of all the things happening in the world?" When it comes down to it, we're a band. We travel around the world, we play music, we're doing what we absolutely love doing. And there's no real harm in that. I have nothing but the best intentions with playing music, and those intentions have been always been the same. Personally for me it's obviously a great cathartic release. It's a great outlet, it's really enjoyable, and then just sharing that with people. All I'm trying to do is make a connection.



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