



(from left)  
Green Day are:  
Tré Cool, Billie  
Joe Armstrong  
and Mike Dirnt.

# The time of their lives

AFTER A LENGTHY HIATUS, GREEN DAY ARE BACK WITH WHAT THEY HOPE WILL BE THEIR MAGNUM OPUS OF TENACIOUS PUNK-ROCK TRACKS

STORY TIFFANY BAKKER

Recently, on a wet and blustery Tuesday night in San Francisco, three men with a great many tattoos and carefully spiked hair took to the stage at a small club, which, on a good night, could cram in a couple of hundred punters. Nothing unusual about that; you'll find bands trying to catch a break in cramped beer-stained corners from Melbourne to Manchester on any given night of the week. But the three men who played on that cold night – Tré Cool, Billie Joe Armstrong and Mike Dirnt – comprise one of the world's biggest bands: Green Day, the punk-rock prophets who formed in 1987

and who, in the ensuing 20-plus years, have sold some 65 million records worldwide. This is the trio who burst from their anarchic Californian roots and, in 1994, went gangbusters globally with the decade-defining *Dookie*, afterwards struggling with embracing mainstream popularity to the point where they almost threw it all in.

That was until the 2004 album *American Idiot* transformed them – particularly singer and chief songwriter Armstrong – into a sort of George W Bush-bashing political megaphone for the masses. The album resonated with the anti-establishment zeitgeist and, in the process, Green Day became one of the

most popular bands in the world, filling stadiums and recording songs alongside the likes of U2.

Yet, on that night in San Francisco, they hadn't played a gig as Green Day for three-and-a-half years (although they continued with their lesser known musical side projects, Foxboro Hot Tubs and The Network), instead opting to take an extended break after the mammoth *American Idiot* tour, which ended in late 2005.

"Most bands that haven't played a gig for over three years have probably broken up," laughs bass player Dirnt, 36. "But we played for three hours, which is actually the longest we've ever played."

"After *American Idiot*, we thought, well, what can we do?" explains the 37-year-old frontman. "With that album, we raised the bar higher than ever. So, we wanted to raise it again. We were arrogant enough to say, 'Let's beat *American Idiot*,' and we were humbled in the process."

The new album is certainly a musical tour de force. As with their previous work, it's something of a rock opus, the track list comprising a whopping 18 songs, with themes of chaos, confusion and anxiety coursing through it. Armstrong says he approached the project as if his life depended on it.

"It drove me crazy and made me happy at the same time," he recalls of the recording process. "Those are good reasons for knowing you pushed yourself to the absolute limit."

Produced by Butch Vig (the man responsible for Nirvana's *Nevermind*, and the drummer in Garbage), some of the album's early sessions were conducted at Green Day HQ in Oakland. Indeed, tracking down Armstrong, Dirnt and Cool today meant travelling over Oakland Bay Bridge, away from San Francisco and into the heart of the staunchly blue-collar community.

There's nothing obviously glamorous about Oakland, save for the glittering waters of East Bay in the background. Reach the bridge's end and there's the small matter of finding your way to the Green Day hub – an expedition akin to conquering a maze. You have to travel under huge concrete overpasses, around nameless shopping malls,

heartbreaking 'Wake Me Up When September Ends'), while Dirnt's complex family issues resulted in him living on the couch at his childhood friend's home for a substantial period of time.

"Our musical tastes were evolving and we became very close," recalls Armstrong. "We started getting into punk-rock at the same time."

The pair started hanging around Gilman Street, in nearby Berkeley, which had a thriving music scene well-known for its hardcore bands and resolutely anti-establishment ethos. It represented everything Armstrong and Dirnt had been looking for as a creative outlet to express their disenchantment.

"We saw what was going on and were able to see music being played in its most raw form," says Armstrong. "We were really lucky to be part of a scene like that."

They started the band as 15-year-olds, eventually settling on Cool – now 36 – as drummer after they met him through the Gilman Street music scene and discovered shared musical interests. Their early gigs were interesting, to say the least. Those were the days when they played alongside such oddly named bands as Sewer Trout and Nasal Sex.

"Those bands," says Armstrong with a laugh, "are no longer around."

"Yeah, but Nasal Sex had a really good stage prop," adds Dirnt. "They had a big nose that blew smoke. And it wasn't working great the night we played with them, so it was more of a runny nose."

In 1990, the band released a couple of EPs and

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past grungy kids hanging out on street corners, then down a dead-end street, where a towering barbed-wire encrusted gate keeps the Green Day compound secure.

As the gate slides open, I'm given a glimpse of a very private space. The band purchased the premises a few years ago as a place to create music on their own terms. Classic cars fill the studio's car park, while Banksy-inspired graffiti of the band's latest lyrics adorn the building. Inside, guitars hang on the walls and there's a magnificent Tiki bar, which, by all accounts, is put to good use.

"Surely, it's time for a VB," chuckles Armstrong (a self-proclaimed champion of the Aussie beer), as he takes a seat on a leather couch in one of the many recording rooms.

Dirnt and Cool join him, and I notice that all three are surprisingly slight for men with such monumental stage presence. Not so surprisingly, each of them is decked out in varying shades of black and substantial amounts of hair product. Up close, despite being in their late-30s, they look barely out of their 20s.

Oakland remains home to the band members. It's where Dirnt and Armstrong met as 10-year-olds and bonded over a mutual apathy of school. Both had difficult teenage years. Armstrong lost his dad to cancer (a topic he explored in *American Idiot*'s

an album called *39/Smooth*. But it was their second release, *Kerplunk*, in 1991, that hinted at the bigger things to come. The album only sold about 50,000 copies but, for an indie-punk band, that was tantamount to massive numbers. A few years later, *Dookie* sold 12 million copies and took Green Day out of Gilman Street and into the global arena, complete with headlining stadium gigs.

All three were in their mid-20s when the massive fame hit, but all three were also married with young children. (Dirnt and Cool have since divorced and have new partners; Armstrong remains married to Adrienne, his wife of 14 years and mother of his sons, Joey, 14, and Jakob, 10.)

Their next two albums, *Insomnia* (1995) and *Nimrod* (1997), were successful, but fell short of *Dookie*'s acclaim. And, in 2000, it all nearly went spectacularly wrong. Green Day's rootsy inspired sixth album, *Warning*, not only didn't sell as well as its predecessors but, more worryingly for the band, it just didn't connect with the die-hard fans who'd greeted each previous release with glee. At one point, the trio even found themselves supporting Blink 182 – considered by fans to be a vastly inferior Green Day imitation.

Then came September 11 and the beginning of the Bush era. With it came Armstrong's realisation he could no longer keep his opinions on mute. >

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**"I'm chomping at the bit to go back on tour right now. It's been so long, it's like making someone stop doing their favourite thing in the world"**

If Bush did anything positive for Armstrong during his presidency, it was to inspire him creatively. Where once he'd been perceived as the snotty nosed perma-adolescent who sang about masturbation and getting stoned, he was now voicing opinions on the war in Iraq and the confused and anxious state of America.

"I'd started to talk more about social issues with *Warning*," he says, "but I think [by *American Idiot*] I'd gained the confidence to say more."

Armstrong is currently enjoying the beginning of the Obama era, though he admits he remains cautious and a little wary.

"It's a confusing time, and that's what the new record is about," he says. "It's about the end of an era and the beginning of another. We know how one era ended, now we're watching to see how the new one begins."

"I am optimistic to a certain extent," he continues, "but I feel as though a lot of the songs on the record are about desperate times and different issues we're facing, and just chaos and confusion. I think a lot of Americans feel that way. No one knows what the future's going to be but, at the same time, the juxtaposition is that everyone has this new sense of hope because of Obama – hope for a new face and a new administration."

The new album is still too close to Armstrong, and he acknowledges that, right now, he's finding it hard to step away and let it go out into the greater world. He explains that same weight of apprehension even manifests itself when he initially approaches his bandmates with any new lyrics he's written.

"It's difficult in that you're baring yourself and you have no idea what people will think. It can drive you a little loco, you know?"

"I'm still discovering hidden meanings in Billie's lyrics," adds Cool. "I can't keep up with him."

For now, though, the band are looking ahead to a world tour (Australia is on the cards) that should take up most of the year. Armstrong, for one, can't wait to play in front of an audience again.

"I'm chomping at the bit to go back on tour right now," he says. "It's been so long, it's like making someone stop doing their favourite thing in the world. That, in itself, can contribute to the psychotic side of your brain after a while."

More than 20 years after the band formed, all three members of Green Day agree their greatest achievement remains the durability of their bond – both musically and personally.

"I'm really proud of the fact we're still together," says Armstrong. "We've definitely gone through ups and downs, but that happens in any relationship. We have common respect for each other and we like to hang out. And that's rare, because most bands don't last beyond five years."

Dirnt looks at his childhood friend and nods.

"I'm proud of the fact we've honoured this gift of rock'n'roll we've been bestowed with, and we do challenge ourselves," says Dirnt. "We love rock'n'roll, we love the history of it, we love new music and old music. And we don't take it for granted – any of it. I think that's a good thing." **SM**

*Green Day's new album, 21st Century Breakdown (Warner Music), is out May 15.*