

SOUND PRODUCERS



WITH DESCENDENTS, THE DROPKICK MURPHYS AND JAPANDROIDS ON THIS YEAR'S COACHELLA BILL, THREE GENERATIONS OF PUNK WILL BE ROCKING THE DESERT.

by Jeff Nau

"Punk's Not Dead," as Wattie Buchan and The Exploited once sang, but for two of Coachella's three generations of punkers playing this year's festival, there have been some really close calls. Both Brian King, guitar player for Japandroids, and Descendents drummer Bill Stevenson have not only suffered recent near-death experiences—many would say it's sheer luck they're even breathing.

Still, ascribing most punk groups' success to any kind of luck would likely earn you a punch straight to the grill. Both Japandroids and Descendents owe their success as much to a tried-and-true DIY aesthetic as they do those last-minute surgeries and months spent in traction. It's that way of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, of enduring whatever needs to be endured, that's part of the ethos synonymous with punk rock.

It's also about taking chances. While The Dropkick Murphys found the most mainstream success during the '90s punk boom, founder Ken Casey's achievement is largely due to having enough brass balls to impulsively take a potentially disastrous dare. We talked with all three bands about hard times, the days of punk past, and, of course, pissing off as many people as possible—behind the scenes, in the pit and on the net.

You suffered a blood clot, a tumor, diabetes and sleep apnea all in the same year. Did you have any indication something was wrong when you played?

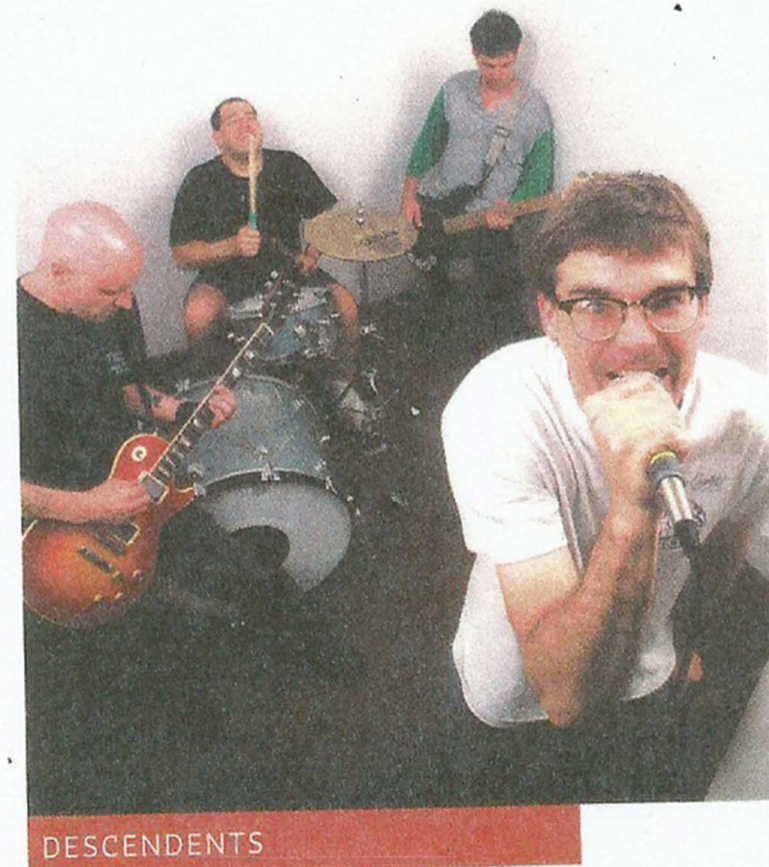
Bill Stevenson (Descendents): Well, I knew that I sucked! One day I woke up and I couldn't see anymore. So I went to the doctors, they told me, "You've got a tumor in your head the size of a grapefruit." Once I found that out, me and Milo [Aukerman, singer] were actually very excited. Like, "Oh, there's a reason Bill sucks. Now we've just gotta get rid of it." So I got a craniotomy, which was 18 hours in the hospital, 56 stitches, heavy meds and painkillers. It was gnarly, man. But yeah, once they took it out, I lost 150 pounds, I was kicking ass on drums.

Brian, you also had a near-death experience that's just about as bad.

Brian King (Japandroids): Yeah, it was a perforated ulcer. Basically, it's where the acid from your ulcer starts leaking into your organs. It's excruciating. People die from it all the time. I was fortunate enough to be able to get into a hospital so they could perform the surgery.

You deal with a lot of the behind-the-scenes stuff yourselves. That sounds like a lot of stress, which couldn't have helped.

Brian: We're still involved on every possible level of every part of being a band, much to the irritation of those who travel with us. We have a booking agent, but we still spend hours with him going over all the venues. We want to be able to make records the way we want to make them. That's why we signed with Polyvinyl. But I still do all the shirt designs, and right now I'm designing the T-shirt for the tour we're about to do in Europe. When you grow up listening to certain kinds of bands, and then decide you want to do that, you just forge a certain attitude that is very difficult to let go of.



"I DARE YOU TO PUT A BAND TOGETHER."

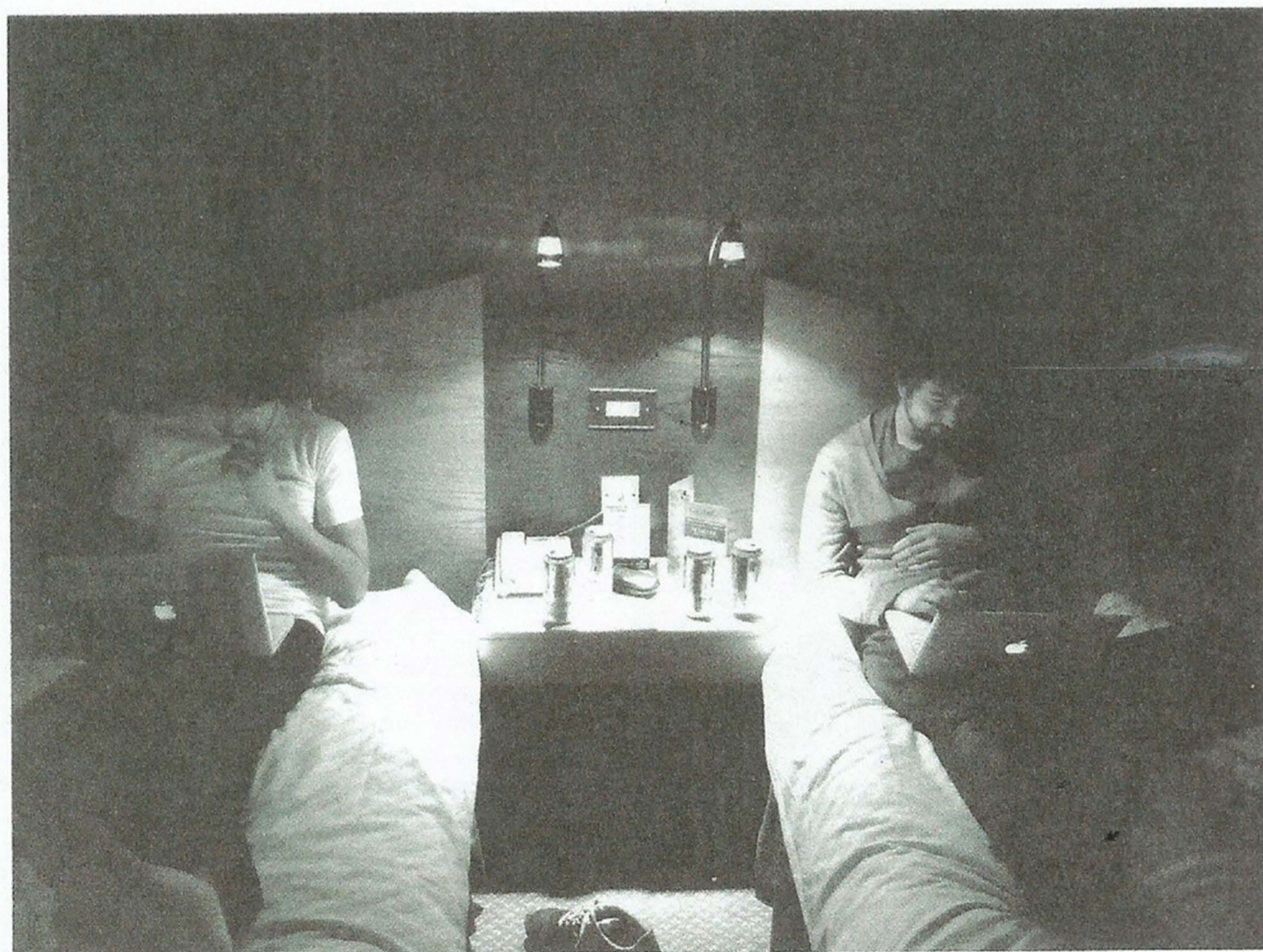


THE DROPKICK MURPHYS

Hard times seem pretty congruent with the old days of punk, when that DIY aesthetic was more of a necessity for survival than a way to live life.

Brian: That's just the way it was for many years. We'd find a venue, rent equipment, get other bands to play, make posters, post bills, get our friends to promote it. We did that for years because it was the only way to play. It was harder to get our foot in the door. We pressed the CDs ourselves, I did all the artwork, and we would mail them to college radio to see if they'd play us. Despite the fact that we've gotten more popular or successful or whatever—which basically means that more people on the Internet know who you are—once you have complete control over your image and your music, it's difficult to give that up.

Bill: It was very DIY in the beginning. You'd have to find a way to put on a show yourselves. Eventually things got a little more organized as punk rock became more mainstream—promoters, clubs, that sort of thing. For the first few years, some of us would get together and just rent a small building and stick someone in front of it to collect whatever cash they could.





Ken, you started knowing next to nothing, doing it all pretty much just on a gamble. Did you even have a musical background?

Ken Casey (Dropkick Murphys): Even before the Dropkicks, I was involved around [Boston], booking shows and stuff like that. I wanted to be in the scene a little more, but I didn't think I really had any musical talent. I was bartending and a friend said, "I got a show I'm putting together in three weeks and I dare you to put a band together." Otherwise I would have been talking about it forever, but because he dared me, I had to do it.

How did the rest of it come together?

Ken: I was a lefty and I got a right-handed bass, so I strung it upside down. We put a band together, we wrote a couple of songs and did some covers, and that was our first show. So yeah, we always approached things with more of a DIY attitude, and with the friendships we built in the early days, it was the same. We had the Rat, which was the big punk club in Boston, and we built up a fan base there from scratch.

Brian, does your illness tie in to what you've been writing lyrically? There aren't really any explicit references to it on the new album, but the lyrics seem more visceral this time.

Brian: Well, that was my first real near-death experience, you know? The experience of the ulcer and the surgery, taken as a whole, it gives you a new range of experiences and emotions you've never felt in your life. I never really knew what pain or helplessness or fear was like before then. In a very short amount of time, I got to experience all those human emotions.

It was a situation so far removed from 99.9% of my lifetime experiences that it just would be impossible to not write about it. Not being cheesy, but just find a way to say it without saying it, you know.

The Dropkicks are pretty much the most political of these three bands. How important is politics in punk?

Ken: I grew up as someone concerned with standing up for your rights, and that's probably what we've become known for. But to take yourselves too seriously—I mean, you gotta have the light moments too or people will just tune you out, you know? I don't like to go to a concert of a particular band and be bombarded with whatever the message may be in their lyrics and on stage. I don't want to go to some concert and be lectured by some high school dropout. So we try to keep it light.

At the same time, you guys have been pretty outwardly liberal—Rock Against Bush, supporting unions and the like. Has there been much of a backlash?

Ken: Yeah, we're probably known mostly for things of a political standpoint. Coming from a union family and growing up around the Boston area—around the working-class people of America—was a huge influence on the songwriting. Our first incarnation of the band was a bunch of construction guys. But it's amazing the stuff you see online sometimes. Seventeen years into it I'm still shocked. Like when we [support] the teacher's strike publicly, we'll see stuff online like, "I've been a fan of yours for 10 years and I'm never listening to you again!"

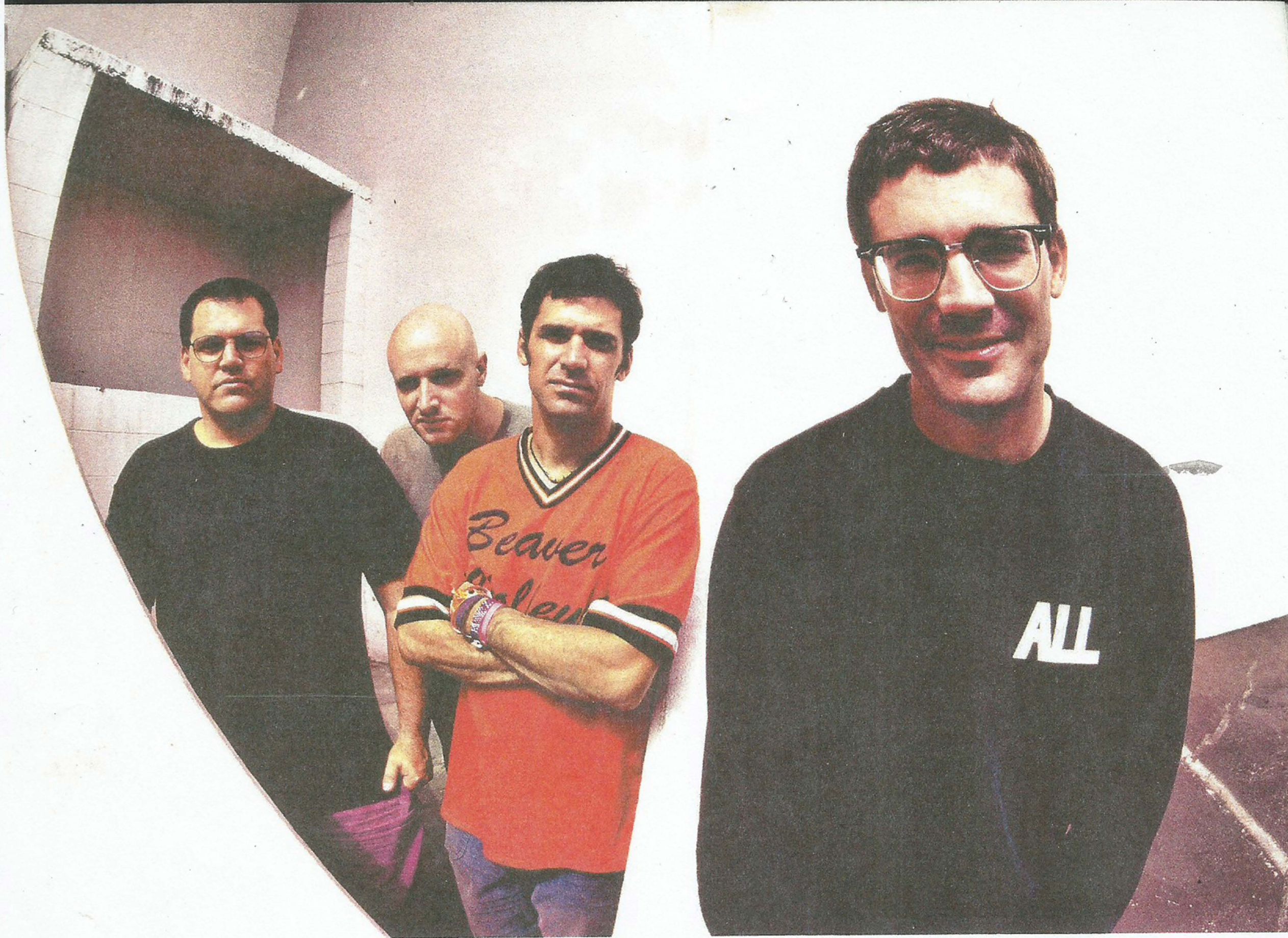
Descendents came from pretty much the opposite end of the spectrum. What was it like playing in a punk band from Hermosa Beach?

Bill: I grew up a pretty naive suburban beach kid. I think, to a large degree, we all did, especially the original lineup. That's where we all came from. There wasn't a lot of politics involved; we weren't at a point where those things were crossing our mental paths. We were kids trying to get cheeseburgers and girls. It was pretty simplistic, I suppose.

Brian: You want to be able to sing songs that people can relate to. It's like, what have you been doing between your first record and your last? Well, you've been touring around the world, so you have no shortage of stuff to write about, but at the same time, no one wants to hear about your touring! I took the surgery, took the experience I had, and had to transform it into something a regular person would pick up and identify with.

Was there a punk scene in Vancouver, or any kind of real music scene at all?

Brian: There was some stuff going on there in the '80s and early '90s, but anything else going on in my time was underground and marginalized. It's not like Vancouver has declared war on music, but a long time ago, the city decided that rock music wasn't exactly an important enough art form to exhibit culturally. They care about real estate. When the city does that, it just can't produce bands, or really support music of any kind. Even if you've got one place—one bar or club where all these different bands have played—if it sits



on valuable real estate, it's only a matter of time before they find an excuse to tear it down, bulldoze it and build condos. Or they build new condos around a club and people living there decided they don't like the fact that there's a noisy club across the street.

Part of what captured that punk spirit was its raw sound, which could be attributed to the cheaper analog equipment. Bill, as a longtime producer, do you miss anything about it, before things got relatively polished? Or is it really just the songs that matter?

Bill: The songwriting and the moxie with which the [bands] perform, these are the things that matter. The other things in the studio can matter, but in history, that's not what's gonna matter. It's the song that brought a tear to your eye, it's the song you heard when you were on a road trip with your girlfriend—the lyrics, the melody. That's what matters.

Japandroids' music strikes me as not punk per se, but would it be fair to say it captures that spirit?

Brian: I feel like Descendents existed at a time where the label of punk had a more concentrated meaning or location, you know? Now it's like, in mainstream culture, you'll find out about, say, some popular chef that has tattoos, and he becomes the "punk rock chef." I don't even know what that means. As time goes on and "punk" has been co-branded and co-opted into so many other things, it's sort of replaced the place of countless other words. I guess now that I'm older I can go and listen to the records I listened to in my youth and understand them, making them general enough to be inclusive.

Is there anything you miss about it, Ken?

Ken: I'd say I miss that part of camaraderie, of teaming up with other bands and approaching things from more of a DIY aesthetic. And the friendships. We made a lot of good friends, friends that still show up to our gigs today when they come through town. Those days were simple and new and exciting, so I miss that.

Are you nervous about Coachella at all?

Ken: Nah, we've been doing festivals in Europe that are kinda similar in terms of size. Sometimes the larger it is, the more anonymous and less nerve-wracking it is. (Laughs) It's just a show. There will be people who like us and plenty more who hate us, but we'll be used to it.

"SEVENTEEN YEARS INTO IT I'M STILL SHOCKED."

