

FUGAZI

By Juan Obando



Can you please introduce yourself and tell us what have you been working on lately? I understand you have a record label and a new band..

My name is Guy Picciotto - I have been playing music since I was about 14 years old and I have played in alot of bands over the years, like Rites of Spring, One Last Wish, Happy Go Licky and Fugazi. Though all those bands released records, Fugazi is probably the band that achieved the most and definitely lasted the longest. We have been playing together for around 16 years and have put out 8 albums, a documentary movie INSTRUMENT and toured all over the world.

At the moment, though, Fugazi is not really a working band. Basically,our drummer has a big family now, with three sons so hedecided that he needed to take a break. We always worked really hard, toured alot and I think he needed to concentrate on his family for the moment so we all agreed to work on other stuff. Whether we ever play together again or not is kind of up in the air. I really don't know what the future will hold for us as a band.

For now everyone is working on other projects. Our bassist Joe lives in Los Angeles now and has been playing with some people out there including John Frusciante. Ian, our other vocalist and guitarist, has a new band called the Evens. Brendan, our drummer, is working on soundtracks and other tv oriented projects. As for me, I am writing songs on my own and with my old bandmate from Rites of Spring , Eddie Janney. There is no new band yet but I am trying to head in that direction.

I also do alot of producing on the side. Recent records that I have worked on are with bands like the Casual Dots(on Kill Rock Stars)and Blonde Redhead (on 4 AD). My record label, Peterbilt, is not that active right now but I did recently put out a solo CD by an amazing guitarist named Mick Barr (from Chrom Tech and Orthrelm). He is really brilliant - one of the most psychotic guitarists I have ever seen.

Your latest release "The Argument" is one of the most solid Fugazi albums, but is surprising for me to read that some songs are very old yet they all sound like "the argument"; is there a stage in the proces of recording an album when you tie down the whole concept? how do you get the "lego" to sound like a whole?

That's a good question - I don't know how to explain it except to say that we are a band that are always writing parts of songs and sometimes those parts don't come together into complete songs for years and years. It can be sort of a joke within the band about how long some of the ideas kick around without fully materializing. The one song on the Argument that was really emblematic of that whole thing is EPIC PROBLEM which earned its name because it took so long to get finished. We fucked around with that song for easily ten years before we finally came up with the arrangement and lyrics that we finally recorded.

But we have always had songs appear on our records long after we'd written them. A song like KYEO from the Steady Diet album was actually written around the time of 13 Songs but we just never got it down before then. FURNITURE is also one of the earliest songs we ever wrote and we only released it recently on a single about 14 years later!

In "the Argument" you invite some people over, can you tell us who they are and how do you feel as a band playing with other people?

When the band first started, before we really toured or anything, we used to have alot of people get up and play with the band. For some shows we would have a trumpet player or an organ player or a percussionist just get up and play with the group for the hell of it. Once we started touring and recording we kind of stopped being so open that way and it was really just the four of us working alone for most of the last 15 years.

After we recorded END HITS that started to change again. On that album Brendan had overdubbed alot of additional drums on some of the songs -- it sounded cool bringing in the sound of counter rhythms so on songs like ARPEGGIATOR or CLOSED CAPTIONED Brendan is actually playing two drumkits against each other with overdubs.

When it came time to play those songs live we realized they didn't really sound the same with just one drum kit so we decided to ask our roadie Jerry to play those overdubbed parts along with Brendan. He had been playing in other bands like Fidelity Jones and the All Scars for years (and strangely enough had actually auditioned with Ian and Joe before Brendan even joined Fugazi). Since he was already well integrated with the band from working for us as a roadie, it just fell into place really easily. As time went on we added more and more songs for him to play on and he also started playing other percussion instruments and trumpet as well. It was like having an additional weapon to work with.

When we went into recording for the ARGUMENT we knew Jerry would be playing with us because alot of the songs were written with him involved. Jerry also introduced us to Amy Domingues who played cello on a couple of the songs and I brought in Kathi Wilcox and Bridget Cross to sing on a couple of songs because I liked their voices and I thought it would add something unexpected and cool to the album. LIFE AND LIMB was actually written with Bridget's voice in mind because I had worked with her before and knew her voice would be perfect for it. But really the idea was not just to get people to play on the album for the hell of it but really because we thought it would help the songs - it wasn't just window dressing - we felt they really added something and expanded the sound.

In "Instrument" (Fugazi Documentary Film) you find the word "control" being linked to the band most of the time, in 15 years of recording/playing in which situations did you lose that control and in wich situations did you gain more control?

Well, really we have never lost any control because from the beginning we have always insisted on doing everything ourselves. I think sometimes people think we have sacrificed alot to maintain that kind autonomy, by not signing to a major label or getting a manager or anything like that but the truth is we could not have been a band and lasted as long as we did any other way.

We are just the type of people who hate being told what to do and its just easier for us to deal with making music if we don't feel like we are working for someone else. Within the band sometimes it gets difficult because there is so much stuff to take care of and its not always that much fun dealing with alot of the bullshit but we kind of feel that if you avoid getting your hands dirty with the details you get divorced a bit from reality of what you're doing.

In the film, you describe the 80s as a selfbuilt independent scene while you say in the 90s corporate america saw future profit in "punk rock", what do you think it would be the state of music at the end of the 00s?

I am not very good at making predictions about such large generalities as the coming "state of music". I think in a lot of ways things never really change. There is always a very large portion of music that is created and sold as a commodity. Sometimes that music is interesting and has some aesthetic merit but that is almost accidental within the standard music industry that's real focus is marketing and generating profit.

But really there is also always a counter weight that is expressed in more underground styles of music. There are always these other forms that come into being as ways of communicating within a community or as a way of expressing radical musical, artistic, political or social ideas. Because that kind of music isn't defined by its appeal to mass tastes or its efficiency in generating profit, it kind of exists in its own sphere - and there is invariably a network created to sustain it because I think people will always have that impulse to go against the grain and experience true alternatives (not "Alternative").

In Instrument you guys are practicing in a house in Connecticut how long did you stayed there and how was the experience? you seem like communicating in your own crafted language....

That house was great. It was just this old wooden house owned by Ian's grandparents in a really rural part of Connecticut. Sometimes the band used to sleep there if we were playing in New York City or anywhere nearby. Eventually, it occured to us that it might be a good place to write songs because we could get away from all the distractions of being home in DC and we could just focus on making music. So we started going up there with our little 8 track studio --- we would practice and make demo's, usually for about a week to ten days at a time. It was cool because there is nothing to do up there but cook, eat , read, walk in the woods and play music - plus there was a really nice old piano there which both Ian and Brendan made good use of.

I think both In on the Killtaker and Red Medicine were largely written and demo-ed there at the Guilford House as we called it.

Brendan (Canty, Drummer)seems to be a major part of the writing process, its been always like that? your early stuff seems more guitar written/driven....

Brendan is a pretty amazing instrumentalist and people don't always know that besides drums he also plays guitar, bass and keyboards. There are alot of songs where he actually wrote the bassline (like in BRENDAN #1) or the guitar part (like CASHOUT) - and even when he doesn't, he is a masterful arranger.

The very early Fugazi stuff, though, was mostly written by Ian and Joe because they had been playing together for awhile before Brendan and I joined. I still wrote the lyrics for the songs I sang but most of the music on "13 Songs" was from Ian and sometimes Joe. Around the time of the REPEATER album is when I started playing guitar so from there Brendan and I got more involved in the songwriting. More recently most of the songs end up being pretty true collaborations between all four of us, with everyone putting in ideas and parts.

Is there any specific aspect of your enviroment that influences your writing or your sound in any way?

I guess the most obvious thing is that we grew up surrounded by DC bands - so the whole time we were first getting into playing music we were seeing bands like the Bad Brains, Void, the Faith, Nation of Ulysses so that definitely kind of shaped our idea of the power music could have.

I am also sure that the weirdness of the city itself has impacted us in alot of ways but having never lived anywhere else I think I am too close to know how.

File sharing, digital media, electronics ,speed of information..... how do you think technology has afected music as an art form in the last 15 years?

As a band we are totally fine with people downloading music and sharing files - all that shit. To us its just like the old days of making cassettes for your friends - music is there to be

shared so that's fine. I think its made things easier for people - everything is fairly easily accessed.

In a way, though its almost made everything so easy that maybe things feel a bit more disposable. When you had to really work hard to find a vinyl album and then you had to drag those crates of albums with you every time you moved- the physicality of them made them a deep part of their life. You had to be discriminating about what you spent your time, money and living space on - it was a commitment that took up material space in your life. I wonder sometimes if people feel the same attachment to mp3's - it all feels so much more liquid and interior as if the music was just part of an internal dialogue and not something out in the world that needed to be engaged with.

But that could also just be my own techno-nostalgia for the things I grew up with. Mostly, I am happy with anything that makes music cheaper and more available to people.

on the other hand "war" and "terrorism" seem to be the words of the moment, what do you think of the whole "campaign"(if there is one) and the overall situation of the world nowadays

Every day gives new evidence as to what a disaster the Bush presidency has been for the world. Obviously, the US government has for a long time entertained rather dubious policies at home and in the world, but there is no question that the current Administration is exponentially the most fucked up. The War in Iraq has been an abomination and every day it becomes more and more clear how badly we have damaged that society in our supposed attempt to be humanitarian liberators.

I think the loose use of the word "terrorism" is one of the smoke-screens that obscures reasoning on these issues. It somehow exempts the destructive, and far more massive, impact of state run war policies from the same ignominy that seems reserved for "state-less" terrorists as if a blown up home or a destroyed human body can tell the difference.

I have to struggle against my pessimism and remind myself that human beings are the ones who make these decisions and possibly human beings can be the ones to reverse them.

You're still a passionate music fan.. ¿is there any contemporary art act (film, music..) that wakes up feelings like a bad brains or the cramps show used to? or is your aproach different now that you have more than 15 years playing music live?

I don't know that I will ever experience the kind of positive destabilization that I felt when I first saw the Cramps and the Bad Brains in 1979 and 1980 because I was so young then and at 13 years old those kinds of moments have an impact that is kind of hard to reproduce when you are so much older and have taken in so much in the intervening years.

But still, I am absolutely routinely blown away by music and films and art and writing. I still see things all the time that blow my mind and make me feel like there are still doors being opened. I just saw this band the No Neck Blues Band the other night and they were like that. Just completely wild and unexpected. They took a small room and made it explode with a sense of possibility.

Any "guitar hero"?

I love Tom Verlaine and Richard Lloyd of Television. I guess they are kind of obvious choices but I just never get tired of listening to the way they play - the way they weave their lines together is totally amazing - no one does it better than them.

You told me FUGAZI is not a working band right now, do you think youll be touring again? Is there any project coming soon?

The only new project that we are working on at all right now is called the Fugazi Live series. For most of the time we've been a band we've taped our live shows so now we are slowly trying to make those show tapes available. We started by picking 20 tapes from various years and we are selling them as CDs at www.dischord.com. There is more information about the concept on the site.

Was instrument a project since teh beggining, if not can you tell is how the idea came up?

Jem Cohen is the guy who shot most of the film INSTRUMENT. He is an old friend of Ian's from High School and he had gone on to become a director/filmmaker. From the beginning of Fugazi he was one of our closest friends and collaborators. For example, he made a movie called "Glue Man" which inspired our song by the same name and from there he often helped us with cover artwork and other stuff. He also routinely filmed us when we played live and he built up quite a collection of Super 8 film footage of us playing. At a certain point he realized he wanted to try and make some kind of feature film out of all the pieces he had so we decided to work on it together and over a couple of years he filmed more background stuff (interviews, studio footage etc.) and we worked together on editing it as kind of an unconventional history of the first 10 years of the band. It was a fuck of alot of work but we are all really happy it exists because it really offers some kind of window on the band, particularly for those people who never got a chance to see us live.



This interview was first published by BZC Media in 2005 and permitted by the band to be distributed in AUDIO2008 www.bazucobazuco.com www.dischord.com

