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Punk rock grows up

By Elysa Gardner, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — The guys in Green Day know how to make an entrance.



Might Green Day appear in the film version of *American Idiot*? "I don't have much acting chops," says Billie Joe Armstrong (center).

By Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

Billie Joe Armstrong, the band's frontman and guitarist, and bassist Mike Dirnt bounce into a hotel room with smiles and handshakes at the ready. No sooner have they said hello than, as if on cue, a door dividing the bed and bath areas swings open and drummer Tre Cool literally leaps in, flashing a bug-eyed grin that brings to mind a friendlier version of Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining*. Gotcha!

It's a fitting greeting from three musicians who have surprised many people recently. Green Day emerged on the pop scene more than a decade ago with *Dookie*, a collection of scrappy nuggets that helped keep punk's spirit alive after Kurt Cobain's suicide. But in contrast to their brooding, grunge predecessors, the Oakland-based band reveled in a barely post-adolescent irreverence. When this reporter last interviewed them, in 1995, the subject of nose-picking came up — as did several, um, phlegm balls from Armstrong's throat.

But there is to be no spitting or potty talk this afternoon. Armstrong and his bandmates may still sport spiky hair and spew goofy jokes, but as [Sean Ross of Edison Media Research](#) notes, "Boogers have become someone else's territory." While Green

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Day-influenced groups such as Good Charlotte and Sum 41 supply radio with tunes about growing pains and pranks and their peers make news with microphone mishaps and wardrobe malfunctions, the members of Green Day — now all in their early 30s, with children — are channeling their energy into more adult concerns.

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Their current CD, *American Idiot*, which arrived less than two months before November's presidential election, is a scalding state-of-the-union address that sinks its teeth into everything from junk TV to Bush foreign policy. A concept album tracing a young man's alienation and evolution through songs that can stretch over nine minutes long, it has been dubbed a "punk-rock opera" — a seeming contradiction in terms, given that punk first gained force partly as a reaction to the grandiosity embodied by rock operas such as The Who's *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia*, to which *Idiot* has been compared. (**Related photo gallery:** [Green Day, far from burned out](#))

But Armstrong sees nothing ironic about *Idiot's* format. "I love punk rock, but it can become self-defeating when people say that you're not allowed to grow, or to try to take things to a new level. If we've learned anything from punk, it's that you have to be an individual and do your own thing."

Fans and music-biz insiders seem to agree. *Idiot*, which has sold 2.1 million copies, was Green Day's first effort to debut at No. 1 on *Billboard's* pop albums chart — a position it reclaimed in mid-January. That resurgence wasn't hurt when, in December, the band was nominated for seven Grammy Awards. When the trophies are handed out Feb. 13, the band stands to collect in such major categories as album and record of the year.

"We're ecstatic," Armstrong says without a sliver of sarcasm. His band has also been courted by the film industry: A screen version of *Idiot* is in development. "We've written a treatment for it. It's in the beginning stages, but we're definitely pushing in that direction."

Could this mean that Green Day's singer will follow the footsteps of Roger Daltrey, Mick Jagger and Jon Bon Jovi onto celluloid?

Green Day by the numbers

Sales of *American Idiot* to date:
2.1 million

Paid downloads of *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* track to date:
237,000

Grammy nominations, including record and album of the year and one for their producer, Rob Cavallo: 7

***Boulevard of Broken Dreams'* position on modern rock, active rock and adult alternative album radio airplay charts this week (No. 8 in airplay overall):** 1

"I don't have much acting chops," Armstrong demurs. "But you never know."

At this point, Green Day enjoys enough popularity and credibility to sustain such a gamble. Where airplay is concerned, says Edison Media's Ross, *Idiot* has reinvigorated a career that had already shown staying power. "They were ahead of almost anyone else in terms of longevity. They were never unwelcome at rock radio."

The CD also has allowed the group to express its social and political views without engendering the kind of backlash that threatened other artists who have spoken out against the Bush administration and the war in Iraq. Though its lyrics can be pointed — "I'm not a part of a redneck agenda" and "*Sieg Heil* to the president gasman" could hardly be called subtle — Ross says the overall message is conveniently adaptable.

"People take what they want from it. If you don't like the president, you hear (the criticism) as being about the president. If you do like him but don't like the media, you

latch onto that part."

But Armstrong maintains he has never been afraid of ruffling feathers. He has been involved with the partisan group Punk Voter since 2002, and Green Day recorded an original song, *Favorite Son*, for its 2004 compilation *Rock Against Bush, Volume 2*. Punk Voter founder Fat Mike of the band NOFX adds that Green Day has spoken on behalf of the organization. "They didn't just tell kids to go out and vote," Mike says. "They told kids to find out what a (jerk) Bush is, then go out there and vote."

Idiot's title track was written, Armstrong says, "around the time journalists were being 'embedded' in tanks on the road to Iraq. We were watching things unfold, surrounded by all that was going on in the news and pop culture. I wanted to say the most controversial (things) I could while still keeping the songs smart and articulate. And there's a sense of humor there, which makes it more inviting than if I were just pointing fingers."

Through the album's central character, who is introduced in a five-part song suite titled *Jesus of Suburbia*, the group also sought to examine some of the more personal struggles that can get swept up in times of social turmoil.

"It's following this guy who's trying to find the true meaning of rebellion, whether it's a path to self-destruction or it's about following your ethics and beliefs," Armstrong says. "It's that much more difficult to become a man, or a woman, in this day and age."

Parenthood has made such issues more pressing for the singer — who has two sons with his wife, Adrienne — and his bandmates, who are both divorced dads.

"Having children makes you look at the world a bit differently," Armstrong says. "You want to lash out a little more, and that affects how you write songs."

"And there's nothing more humbling than being a parent. There are two types of people you can never talk down to: old people and kids. You have to communicate with your kids all the time — not to censor them, but to talk about things."

Cool concedes that the band has to manage "a balancing act between our families at home and our families on the road, which would be our fans. We have to give them time, too, you know?"

Dirnt says Green Day's relationship with its fans has made its *American Idiot* tour — which Cool defines as "our biggest yet, and the first in a long time where we're playing a lot of new material" — especially satisfying.

"It's nice to take chances, and it's really nice for the people who have followed us for a long time," Dirnt says. "Where others might have dropped off, they believed in us — probably more than we believed in ourselves at times."

Armstrong also has noticed the band's fan base growing, and not only in terms of quantity.

"I got a letter from a 59-year-old guy saying that (*Idiot*) was the best record in 20 years for him. And then there'll be some 13-year-old just getting into music for the first time, who doesn't even know the songs from *Dookie*, which is great. We've always dreamed about having a really diverse audience."

Rolling Stone contributing editor Anthony DeCurtis believes the group has "entered the game of artists who play in a bigger social arena. They've found a way to stay true to what they're about but also position themselves so that people will wonder what they're going to do next. That's a signal that they're playing for keeps."

The band members affirm that they're in this for the long haul. "We have fans who haven't even been born yet," Cool says. "Right now, somebody's having sex and getting pregnant, and their kid's gonna be a Green Day fan."

"Or," Dirnt pipes up, "they're having sex and getting pregnant while *listening* to Green Day."

"Yeah," Cool says, laughing. "That little biter doesn't have a choice, does he?"

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