



THE INSIDE TRACK

THREE CHEERS FOR SWEET REVENGE

Despite boasting an influence that's spanned artists from Green Day to Foo Fighters, **JAWBREAKER** never got their dues first time around. Now reunited, the punk trio reflect on their legacy, where it all went wrong, and tentatively look to the future...

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At the Guitar Center on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, there's a display dedicated to Kurt Cobain. It features a bust of the late Nirvana frontman, a replica of his left-handed Fender guitar and a framed Jawbreaker T-shirt – the same one that he was once photographed proudly wearing with a young Frances Bean by his side.

In their original tenure as a band, Jawbreaker never got to be as big as Nirvana, of course, but their impact on alternative music was seismic. Want proof? Their songs have been covered by artists like Fall Out Boy, Rise Against, Foo Fighters and Hayley Williams among others. In the 2017 documentary about the band, *Don't Break Down*, Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong professes his love for the punk trio. Chances are, even if you aren't hugely familiar with Jawbreaker, they're probably one of your favourite band's favourite bands.

Formed in New York in 1986 while vocalist and guitarist Blake Schwarzenbach, bassist Chris Bauermeister and drummer Adam Pfahler were in college, Jawbreaker released four albums in their 10 years together. The first three – 1990's *Unfun*, 1992's *Bivouac* and 1994's *24 Hour Revenge Therapy* – were all released on independent labels, but in the aftermath of the major label feeding frenzy that had propelled both Nirvana and Green Day into the mainstream, Jawbreaker's fourth record, 1995's *Dear You*, came out on Geffen. Unlike Nirvana and Green Day, however, things didn't turn out so well for Jawbreaker. Having come up in the notoriously anti-establishment Bay Area punk scene centred around the Alternative Music Foundation – an all-ages, non-profit collective and venue located at and better known as 924 Gilman Street – the band were shunned by the locals when news broke that they'd signed to a major label (for a reputed million dollars).

Jawbreaker back in the day:
blood, sweat and beers



In fact, members of the audience would turn their backs and sit down when Jawbreaker played songs from *Dear You*. With tensions in the band already riding high, this exacerbated underlying issues, and so a year after *Dear You* came out, Blake, Adam and Chris went their separate ways.

In the years that followed, however, something unexpected happened. The band's popularity grew and grew and more and more bands cited their sophisticated, intelligent, experimental and emotionally-traumatised brand of punk as an influence. To rub it in, a few years after their demise, the commercial success of pop-punk and emo demonstrated the success that Jawbreaker could have had, had they not been slightly ahead of their time.

"I think if I was bitter about anything," says Blake, who went on to play in acclaimed bands *Jets To Brazil* and *Forgetters*, "it was watching mediocre bands become enormously successful using the same blueprint. Not that they were copying us, but that it was okay to sound like that suddenly. Bands who were doing much less interesting music – lyrically especially – became hugely popular. Fifteen years of watching that happen from the sidelines was frustrating. Especially as we all had new bands, and while they did fine, they weren't tremendously successful."

As those years marched by, it became patently clear that Jawbreaker's legacy and legend was not just alive and well, but also greater than ever. What's more, *Dear You* – which Geffen had let go out of print after it sold only 40,000 copies – came to be regarded as a lost classic, belatedly appreciated. Rumours circulated for years that they might reunite, but it seemed incredibly unlikely. But then, in 2017, they were announced as headliners for Riot Fest in Chicago, and that September – after a couple of intimate West Coast warm-up shows – the trio stepped out in front of the largest crowd they'd ever played to.

"It was very intense," says Blake of that experience. "I had to kind of slow myself down before I went onstage, because I could feel my heart racing. But – and I think each of us would say this – it didn't even feel like we were playing until we were on, like, our fifth song. We just kept our heads, played, and tried to hit every note."

"I was excited," adds Adam. "I was terrified as well, but we were really prepared because we had been practising a lot since the previous April. So I wasn't really sweating the actual mechanics of what was going to happen. It was just sort of an unknown if we would go over in that environment, playing outside, to that many people. But the crowd really brought it. They emboldened us to have a good time."

"I had experienced nothing like that before in my life," says Chris, who admits he had no idea



Jawbreaker 2.0: older, sure. Wiser? Hmm...

"I WAS AT WAR WITH MYSELF TOWARDS THE END OF JAWBREAKER"

BLAKE SCHWARZENBACH

how popular Jawbreaker had become until he actually stepped out on to the stage at Riot Fest. "I had no benchmark. I was just like, 'Okay, I guess this is happening, then...'"

It's been a little over 18 months since Riot Fest. Back then, the band had no idea if they would do anything after it, but not only have they been playing shows across the U.S. since, but for the first time in 25 years at the end of April, they'll return to the UK. Anyone concerned about three men who are now in their 50s spoiling their legacy – as many bands do when it comes to reunions of this nature – needn't worry. Not only do Jawbreaker sound incredible today, but they're doing justice to the dark and heavy emotional weight of their songs. And while memories and history remain, it's clear that the trio are having fun now, as the tensions and gripes of old – especially between Chris and Blake, who came to blows at the end of their last tour in 1996 – have long since faded with time.

"I think we had to recognise that they weren't really legitimate grudges," says Blake. "I think each of our battles was essentially with ourselves. I was at war with myself towards the end of Jawbreaker. I know Chris was, too. And I think Adam was having a hard time communicating with us and he was frustrated that the band wasn't working. We simply couldn't bridge those gaps in '96, so going away and having our own lives really helped dissipate that idea that someone else had messed it up, or wronged us. Certainly, that was the case for me. I didn't have a problem with Chris – I had a problem owning who I was in Jawbreaker."

"I think in some ways," says Chris, "I still have some damage from the break-up. It was like a bad divorce. I tend to be pessimistic in my outlook and that's sort of bad, so I'm just going with it as it comes and I'll see what happens. But there's a part of me that's still really hesitant about putting all my eggs in that basket and hoping for it to go into the future. I don't see anything currently that will end in disaster, but having had it happen once, I have a constant, irrational fear of things going wrong and that's honestly how I feel. But I'm trying to get over it."

"I always felt like there was unfinished business in this band," adds Adam, who maintained Jawbreaker's website and re-pressed their records while the trio were dormant. "I didn't like the way it ended so hastily. It felt wrong to me. I don't want to use the word 'closure', but that might be the best way to describe it. The way it ended just didn't feel right. And I'm not talking about lingering resentments. There are good ways to break up and there are bad ways, and I didn't think we did it right, so I always kind of hoped we could get back to it."

While the future of Jawbreaker remains uncertain, the band are finally getting their just desserts, as thousands of people who had previously only ever dreamed of seeing them live are finally getting the chance to do so. There's even talk of new music, although the reunion shows haven't allowed Jawbreaker to write as much or as quickly as they'd have liked. If and when new material comes, though, Adam reckons it'll be a 7-inch. For now, all that matters is that the band are experiencing everything the way they should have 20 years or so before.

"I feel vindicated," says Adam. "I've always believed in this band, both while it was happening and posthumously, even when we weren't doing anything or selling records."

And, perhaps most importantly, even when playing the darkest songs from their back catalogue – the abjectly gloomy and existential death march of *Jet Black*, for example, or the poignant, despondent beauty of *Ache* – they look like they're finally happy.

"I'm relatively happy," Blake will qualify, "but I do love playing those songs. This is definitely the most fun we've had playing live, which feels like a bit of restitution – that now we're having the life that we were supposed to have had back then. I just love playing rock guitar. That's the most fun for me in the band, so I'm trying to enhance the guitar solos and really boost that." He chuckles, sounding like a man renewed, just like his band, "I want to up my shred level!" **K!**

JAWBREAKER TOUR THE UK THIS MONTH – SEE THE GIG GUIDE FOR INFORMATION

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Don't go getting too excited for JAWBREAKER's return meaning anything beyond some live shows. For now...

"I'm hoping we can do this for a couple of more years at least," says Adam, optimistically. "We're not booking anything too far ahead and we don't have a five-year plan or anything. We're taking it one day at a time. We haven't discussed even making a [full-length] record. Right now we're just like, 'Let's write one song. When

we have two songs, let's make a 7-inch. When we have five songs, let's make an EP.' That's how we're looking at it."

Lessons learned from the past are still front and centre in their thinking, it would seem.

"We're not putting any pressure on ourselves," Adam admits. "I think that kind of pressure would

split us up again. So we're merely trying to enjoy this as it happens, in the moment."

"I'm just hoping, if we can scrape together enough songs that we're happy with, that we can make another record and tour in places we never got to, like Japan, South America or Eastern Europe. I get messages from people in Brazil and I'm like, 'Yeah. That'd be great.'"

Watch this space...

