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Against Me! has been selling out for the better part of a decade, so complaints about the polish of the band's forthcoming record are already tired to songwriter/vocalist/guitarist Tom Gabel.

Because Gabel is a punk icon and an anarchist, it was little surprise that there were negative reactions when the band jumped to a major label. But as it prepares to release *White Crosses* in June -- the group will play a Daytrotter.com show at RIBCO on May 4 -- Gabel talked about the challenge of being an ever-changing person in a world of rigid expectations.

In a phone interview last week, the 29-year-old Gabel said he wrote *White Crosses* in St.

Augustine, Florida -- breaking away from his longtime home base of Gainesville. "The people who also live there have their perceptions of you," he said of Gainesville. While he has traveled and changed, those perceptions remain fixed. "Moving away from that and just kind of freeing yourself to be who you fucking are was a good and liberating experience," he said.

Of course, those perceptions and expectations belong not only to Gainseville residents but to fans of Against Me! And as the band has evolved, it has faced regular accusations of selling out, whether it was signing to the indie label Fat Wreck Chords or the major label Sire.

"Record labels are record labels," Gabel countered. "The difference between a major record label and an indie record label sometimes is really hard to tell, in my opinion. ... The underlying point for every record label is always the same: to make records and to get them out to people to hear -- to sell records."

Gabel said it's "a running joke among us" that Against Me! makes each album knowing it will need to rebuild its fan base. "Everybody who's already a fan always hates the new record," he said, admittedly exaggerating. "They like the previous record. That's just the way it is."

So it's important to "ignore them when writing," he said. "Trying to figure out what you can do to make somebody happy when writing a song just never works."

That might sound ungrateful to those who have supported the band, but it's a theme for Gabel that pandering doesn't work. He said he studied artists who had long careers, "trying to look at what their defining moments were musically. In a lot of cases, it's when people stopped trying to be something and just accepted who they were. For me, that's a lot of what this record is."

The problem for Gabel and Against Me! is that the musical progression has been *toward* the mainstream rather than against it. So while Gabel claims to be true to himself, his critics call him a sellout.

Against Me!'s first album for Sire -- 2007's *New Wave* -- was described by the All Music Guide as a "straight-up rock record," and although the group had shed most of the punk roughness, it

still had the hammer force of Gabel at its heart. The All Music Guide noted that *New Wave* was "crisp, direct, and sharp. It's clean, but not glossy; it's defiant; it's brash; it's heartfelt," and those traits have been consistent through the band's career, mostly because of Gabel's speaking/spewing vocals and a songwriting style that's the equivalent of a hard stare -- confrontational and not terribly interested in polite conversation. (As the song "Piss & Vinegar" put it: "I would be lying to you if I did not say something. / That would make me feel like a politician, / A middle-of-the-road opinion no one finds offensive or challenging.")

What *has* changed is the music, even though Gabel chafes at the assertion that it has become "poppier."

"I don't necessarily see the pop elements," he said. "I think it's kind of bullshit in a way. I've always had a love of melodies and stuff." He points to "Pints of Guinness Make You Strong," from the band's 2002 *Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose*. "That's a catchy song," he said. "There's a catchy chorus there. That's always been the way I've written."

He does make one concession: "There's more harmonies on this record and stuff like that."

Like *New Wave*, *White Crosses* was produced by Butch Vig, who most famously produced Nirvana's *Nevermind*. Gabel called him the band's "life partner" and said that Against Me! was a little freer this time around. On *New Wave*, the group was building new relationships with a producer and a major label simultaneously. "You're just a little cautious," Gabel said. "It's a natural thing, even if it's subconscious."

Gabel's protests aside, *White Crosses* does mark a radical departure. There are those harmonies, but there are also synthesizers and soaring ballads and some dreamy background vocals, and the sound has been softened enough to make it more approachable. It ain't Justin Bieber, but musically it's baffling that Gabel would object to the claim that it's the poppiest thing Against Me! has ever done.

Yet this kind of misses the point. Exhibit A for every element of the the pop argument is "Ache with Me," but the most important question is: Is it any good? The chorus gives the answer,

clear-eyed and sad but not in any way pathetic or self-pitying: "Do you share the same sense of defeat? / Have you realized all the things you'll never be?"

"Going into this record, I was really kind of interested in dropping the plot, and not really going into it with an agenda of wanting to write about certain things, and just instead seeing where my mind wandered to," Gabel explained of the songwriting process. "Not trying to make sense of things while I was writing them, but just trying to write and make sense of it later."

"I Was a Teenage Anarchist" suggests that Gabel is reconsidering his youthful politics, with the comment that they were "too convenient." But he said his disillusionment isn't with the philosophy but with the movement -- and it's not hard to read into that a dig at fans who would prefer to keep Against Me! in a state of arrested development. "The people professing most loudly that they're the most open-minded individuals are often the most closed-minded individuals," Gabel said. His peers preached autonomous thought and personal freedom, but "when it came to me making decisions for myself, it was like, 'No no no. Not autonomy for you. Autonomy for me.'"

Against Me! Will perform on Tuesday, May 4, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 7 p.m. and also features Dead to Me and the Menzingers. Tickets are $12 in advance and available from RIBCO.com .

For more information on Against Me!, visit AgainstMe.net .