

Tim Mahoney &
Nick Hexum



Radio Days

Critics have ripped their new album, **TRANSISTOR**, to shreds, but the fans still love 311's homebrew mix of dub, rap, reggae and rock. **Maximum Guitar** goes on the road with guitarists Nick Hexum and Tim Mahoney to see how they recreate their phat, funky sounds on stage

by Chris Gill
photography by the author



ONLY A FEW hours before 311 is scheduled to perform at Colorado's famed Red Rocks Amphitheater, the skies darken and rain begins to fall. But even though weather conditions are dismal, an ever-growing crowd of fans gather in eager anticipation of the night's show. Most of the audience is decked out in bright orange ponchos that they've purchased at the venue's concession stands, endowing the seating area with an oddly festive hue. A pair of girls who are braving the elements laugh as their clothes become soaked, never showing any signs of dismay even as they attempt in vain to light a soggy cigarette.

Backstage, 311 guitarists Nick Hexum and Tim Mahoney relax and trade licks. In tribute to bands who have previously graced the stage that 311 is about to appear upon, Mahoney plays the intro to U2's "Sunday, Bloody Sunday." Hexum answers back with one of his favorite licks, the beginning chord progression of the Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" They don't, however, play any Grateful Dead licks, even though Mahoney is an avowed Jerry Garcia fanatic.

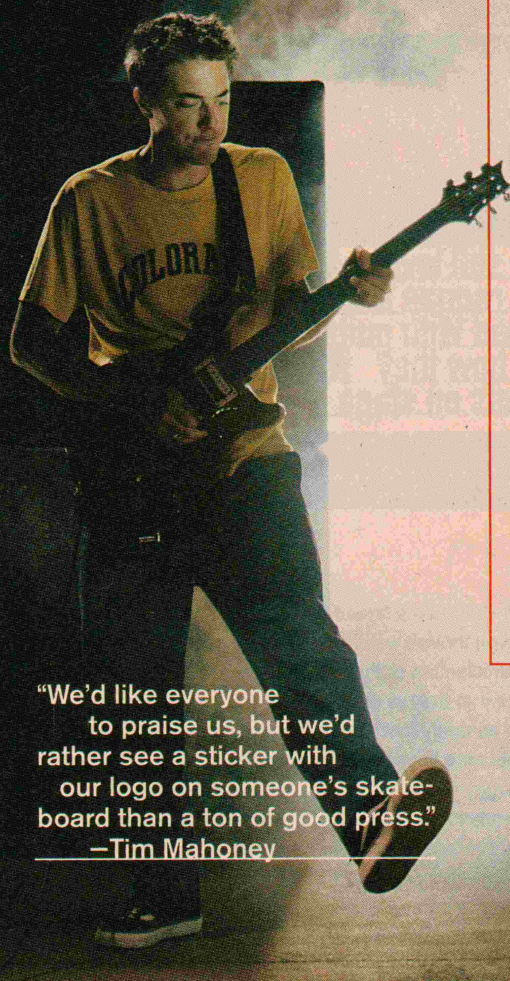
A few minutes later, one of the crew members walks into the dressing room holding a Denver newspaper and shows the band an article. "Check this out," he says. "It says here that, 'half the tickets for the Denver Lollapalooza show are still available, even though it's only a few days away. However, tickets for 311's concert at Red Rocks were sold out five months before the event.'" This is encouraging news, but the band only needs to look outside at the seating area for confirmation that they've acquired an extremely dedicated following.

Perhaps more surprising is the paper's positive report about the band, who have recently received nothing but harsh words from the press. Magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Entertainment Weekly* gave 311's new album, *Transistor* (Capricorn), extremely disparaging reviews, which would lead the uninitiated to assume that the record was a complete failure. But nothing could be further from the truth, as the album sold 130,000 copies in its first week.

Transistor is an ambitious effort that combines hard rock, rap, funk, jazz and trip-hop influences with strong, memorable melodies and an ample dose of dub-inspired production techniques. The result is a style of music unlike anything else out there. *Transistor* is not a dub album in the pure sense of the word, but a fascinating update of the genre that is sure to make dub more accessible to a mainstream American audience. In a way, 311 have done for dub what the Police did for reggae 20 years ago.

Meticulously-produced albums aren't currently in fashion, however, which may be one reason for the harsh reviews. The band holed up in the studio for more than two months making *Transistor*, whereas nowadays most bands are in and out of the studio within two weeks. But with its lush ambience, trippy echo effects and huge vocal harmonies, *Transistor* sounds like the kind of record that most bands would take two years to complete. The album boasts 21 songs and over 70 minutes of material. Surprisingly, Hexum reveals that a lot of good songs didn't make the final cut.

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"We'd like everyone to praise us, but we'd rather see a sticker with our logo on someone's skateboard than a ton of good press."
—Tim Mahoney

But even more amazing is the fact that Hexum, who wrote about half of *Transistor's* songs, is already working on music for the next album. He's put together a portable, computer-based recording studio (see sidebar) that he's taking on the road so he can write songs and record demos in his hotel room, on the bus or backstage. He also plans on incorporating the rig, which features a sampler and a few synthesizer



Mahoney's PRS tortoiseshell Custom



Natural Custom



Cherry Standard

modules, into his stage setup so he can duplicate many of the sounds heard on *Transistor*.

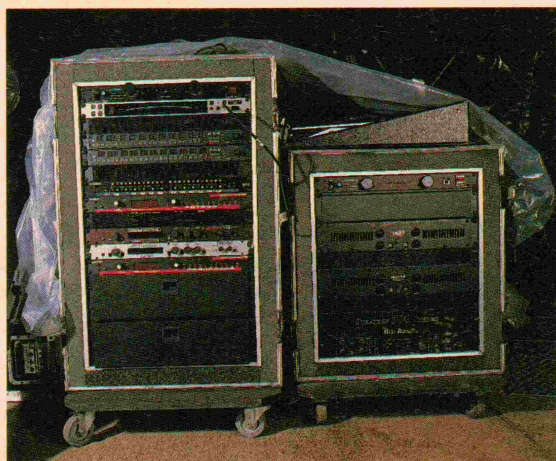
Unlike most of their alternative rock contemporaries, Mahoney and Hexum are unapologetic about 311's pursuit of musical chops. In fact, the band's performance later that night features brief solo segments from both drummer Chad Sexton and bassist P-Nut, something that most critics consider passé. But the smiles that grace the faces of a few thousand cold, wet but satisfied fans as they file out of the venue after the performance show that maybe it's the critics' sour attitudes that are out of fashion.

MAXIMUM GUITAR: *Transistor* is quite an ambitious and well-produced record. How are you going about recreating the record's sounds and effects on stage?

NICK HEXUM: Scotch Ralston, who pro-

duced the record, also mixes our live sound, so he knows where the delays are supposed to go. He's responsible for creating many of the dub effects. Tim also uses his own analog effects for some stuff. I've got my guitar synth going. I'm only using it on one song now, but I'll be phasing it in more and more. The guitar synth has tons of internal sounds, but I've got this other rack that has different synth modules and a sampler, so I can MIDI it up and trigger samples from the album, scratch sounds or whatever. Every day I'm trying to phase that in a little more.

TIM MAHONEY: I have a guitar synth, too, but I used it on two songs that didn't make the record. I really got into analog effects like the Electro-Harmonix Memory Man delay, analog choruses and phasers. There's a lot more effects and tones than on the last record. I was excited to do that. The last record was more stripped down. On this



Mahoney's Electro-Harmonix Memory Mans and t.c. electronics Chorus+
left: Mahoney's stage rack



clockwise from top left: Boss OC-2, Boss FT-2, t.c. electronics Chorus+, Sovtek Small Stone, MXR Phase 100

one we both wanted to get cooler tones.

MG: There are a lot of keyboard sounds on the record. Were they actual keyboards or did you use the guitar synth?

HEXUM: I have a real Clavinet, and I used a Roland JV-1080 a lot. There were also samples from a wide variety of sources that I stored in my Akai S3000 sampler. Before we started recording the album, I would record guitar parts or a vocoder part on the hard drive on my computer. When we got into the studio I would make a full version of the song using just samples and a drum machine, mostly electronic stuff, and maybe a few live instruments that were recorded straight onto the hard drive. We'd put all of my songs down on tape first so we at least had it sounding as good as my pre-production demo. Then we would go back and redo a lot of the guitar parts, although sometimes we'd keep the old ones if they had a nice sound to them. We already had a good sketch of my songs down on tape. Other songs we'd start from scratch. I'm the only one who's into the synth world.

MG: Listening to the record you can't tell that those songs started off primarily as a synth demo.

HEXUM: We tried to make it sound as organic as possible. We also decided not to be purists. We weren't worried about using sounds that we wouldn't be able to pull off live. On stage we skip that sound and let it take on a more raw form.

MG: *Transistor* is a production-oriented record in the classic sense, where the record stands apart from the live show. What effect did recording this album have on how you approach your live show?

HEXUM: I always try to make sure that the song sounds good when it's played just on guitar. Once I'm comfortable with that, I'll phase in the guitar synths and delays. Chad is also starting to use his d-drum a lot and triggering samples. By our next album, I imagine we'll be more fluid with that stuff. Then we'll work on triggering stuff in a live setting during pre-production rehearsals, rather than trying to add it after the fact.

MAHONEY: For live performances, I've tried to keep a lot of the same sounds. There are a couple that I'm still trying to dial in. The song "Prisoner" has a lot of different tones in it. There's one tone that I lost that had an octave-up effect and a T-Wah.

It's a matter of finding those sounds again and programming them into my MIDI board. On our first two records I did a lot of switching between clean and distortion. On a lot of our new songs there's a lot more than just one guitar tone. It took a little while to warm up to get all the switches down after being in the studio.

MG: There are some lush reverb sounds on the record. Was it recorded that way or was it added in mixing?

MAHONEY: Both of us recorded all of our effects on tape.

HEXUM: For guitars, at least. On vocals they were added after they were recorded.

MAHONEY: We worked to make sure all of the tones were the way we wanted them. Once you record a phase shifter you can't change it.

MG: The phasing is very thick and distinct, like on those old dub records from the Seventies. What kind of phase shifter did you use?

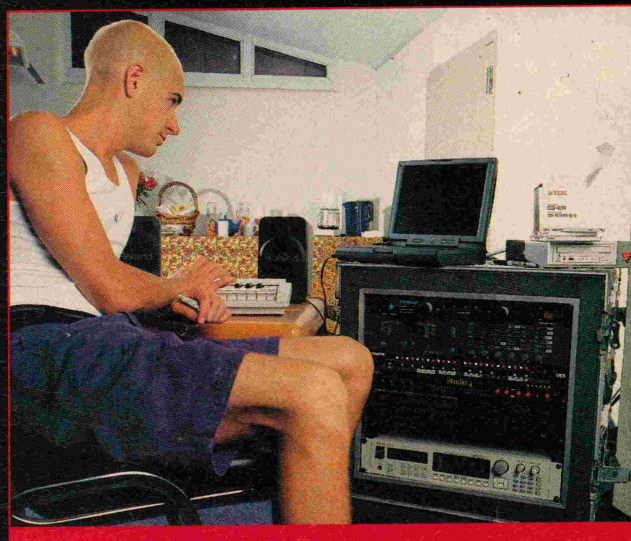
MAHONEY: I used a reissue Small Stone, one of those Russian ones. I also used an

MXR Phase 100.

HEXUM: I used my Rocktron Replifex a lot. I have a Boss SE-70 that I use on stage to recreate the sounds on our older records, like the T-Wah. The Rocktron stuff is really advanced. One of the key effects on the vocals was an old Roland Space Echo, which is a tape echo. The Memory Man has a distinct sound, too.

MAHONEY: I have three Memory Mans

ROLLING ROCK



How 311's NICK HEXUM uses computers to record on the road

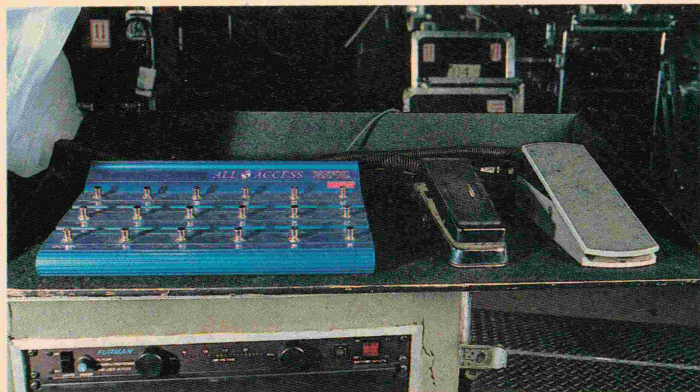
A LOT OF bands complain about how difficult it is to write songs on the road, but Nick Hexum has remedied this situation by assembling a portable studio that makes it easy for him to capture his creative ideas. The entire system fits into a small rack that can be wheeled backstage, into a hotel room or onto the bus.

The core of the system is a Macintosh Powerbook computer loaded with Opcode's Studio Vision sequencing/hard disk recording software. The computer has three gigabytes of internal storage, and Hexum has connected a two gigabyte drive and a CD-ROM burner to the computer for additional storage. Sound sources include an Akai S3000 sampler, and Roland JV-1080 and Waldorf Pulse synth modules. Hexum controls the sound sources either with a Roland PC-160 keyboard controller or with his guitar synth setup. Hexum also uses Steinberg's ReCycle program, which changes the tempo of drum loops without changing the pitch.

"The JV-1080 has thousands of patches, including every hip-hop drum sound you could imagine, drum loops and scratch sounds," says Hexum. "I have this sound card for the JV that features a bunch of bass and drum samples done by Abe Laboriel Sr. and Jr. Sometimes I'll extract beats straight from a CD and put it on the hard drive. I also have loads of sampling CDs."

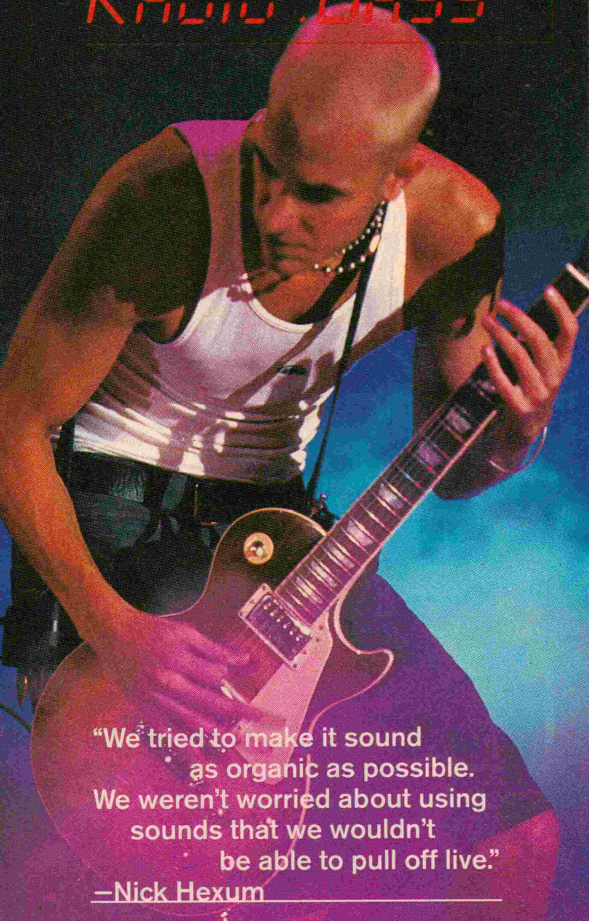
For guitar parts, Hexum plugs his guitar into a Korg Pandora and records direct to hard disk. "I can play anything and get a really good-sounding demo," he comments. "First, I'll sequence everything in MIDI and then I'll record my guitar. Once it's all exactly where I want I'll record it on the hard drive or burn it on a CD. This system lets me do everything except lay down vocals and live drums. I also use Studio Vision to make continuous dance mixes. I'll have a 30-minute sequence that has seven songs in it, and I'll fade in from one song to the next. I can also make my own custom compilations by extracting songs that I like from CDs and burning them onto a separate CD.

"Now I have something to do while I'm waiting for the show," says Hexum. "It helps me keep the songwriting going. Before I just had a guitar and a tape recorder. Now I can make demos that sound good."



Mahoney's pedal board: Rocktron All Access controller, Dunlop CB-535 wah, Ernie Ball volume

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"We tried to make it sound as organic as possible. We weren't worried about using sounds that we wouldn't be able to pull off live."

—Nick Hexum



Hexum's Gibson Les Paul Standard



Hexum's Gibson ES-135

that I travel with so I can have each set at different times—a fast one, a slow one and one that I adjust. The delay times aren't always right on there, but I guess that's the nature of dub. Those and the Small Stone really made the record for me. Analog

delay seems to have a mind of its own. Sometimes when you hit it, it sounds different than it did before.

HEXUM: Some company has got to figure out that there's a demand for being able to control that analog sound with MIDI and saving your settings without having to twiddle the knobs each time. I have a Waldorf Pulse in my synth rack, which is a true analog synth, but you can recall all of the parameters with MIDI. I'd immediately snap up an analog delay or tape delay that would let you do that.

MAHONEY: It's difficult to travel with Echoplexes. The maintenance is too much. Even so, we're having trouble getting Scotch into the MIDI controllable world.

MG: It must have been difficult getting the echo times lined up in the studio.

HEXUM: You have to listen to the echo with a click track. You put it down on tape, so once it's down, it's down. You don't run the effects live. When we do dub, we put the effects down on another track. That way we don't have to worry about any variables when we're mixing.

MG: What would you recommend to someone who wants to start making their own dub mixes?

HEXUM: I usually start with a track where it's just a standard reggae bass line and a drum loop sampled from the Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare sampling CD. Then I'll add a couple of tracks of offbeat keyboard and guitar. To do dub, all you need to do is phase those things in and out and put different effects on them. It's basically a straight song all the way through, but the character of the song comes when you mix it and you take instruments in and out and add effects. Learning how to do that is crucial. You've got to be familiar with King Tubby, so you should go out and get all the Blood and Fire label reissue stuff.

MG: What you're doing with dub is not traditional, though. You've taken it in a new direction.

HEXUM: We're using turntable scratching and making it a little more trip-hop sounding, like on "Light Years." It's cool because

SA [Martinez, vocalist] is becoming an instrumentalist now. He's got his scratching to a level where it really adds something, and he has something to do when we play instrumental jams.

MG: There are a lot of cool wah tones on the record. Was that mainly an envelope follower?

HEXUM: Most of it is a Boss T-Wah.

MAHONEY: I used a wah pedal on "The Continuous Life," but I don't use it that often.

HEXUM: I don't use it at all.

MAHONEY: We use T-Wahs, mostly.

HEXUM: The Boss T-Wah and Octaver are the signature of the 311 sound.

MAHONEY: I hope they don't stop making those octave pedals. The T-Wahs are discontinued, and they're hard to find. I'm using a Boss FT-2 Dynamic Filter now, because I lost my T-Wah in a fire. That one was the best. The T-Wah in the SE-70 is pretty good, too. We've got a couple of envelope followers right now, but it's always good to get more.

MG: Nick, you seem to prefer Les Pauls and hollowbody Gibsons.

HEXUM: I've always played Les Pauls because Mick Jones was my first guitar hero. In our first band, the Eds, Tim and I both played Les Pauls. Paul Reed Smith is probably the top guitar maker out there, but the hollowbody thing for me is really big, and PRS doesn't make a hollowbody.

MAHONEY: I know that PRS is making hollowbodies now, but I haven't played one yet. Up until recently I had the PRS Standards, which have mahogany bodies. Then I got a Santana model, which has a maple top. I recorded all of *Transistor* with the Santana model. But it's set up differently than the Standard—the toggle switches are different and the scale length is not the same. I wanted to get a new guitar, so I got two Customs with maple tops. They did them custom for me and put a bird of prey inlay on them. I still love the warmth of the all-mahogany ones. I also love the sound of hollowbodies. There are a couple of songs where I could use it, but I tend to use the same guitar through the whole set. The Paul Reed Smith is really good for doing nice clean tones and the heavy metal distortion.

MG: You've been in a battle with music critics for a while now. The reviews on this album in particular have been really brutal.

HEXUM: Critics don't feel like they had a part in supporting our band, so they feel like they've got to say that we suck because they never covered us. Now they have to cover us, so they pan us. Bad reviews really don't affect much. That's been a long-standing realization with us. Critics only have an effect on a very small amount of the actual

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ways to get started. Boss, Yamaha and Akai offer low-cost, hand-held samplers that you can use to sample your own loops and break beats. The Boss SP-202 Dr. Sampler even includes two filters and a ring modulator that let you tweak your samples just like the pros.

If you have a PC or Mac, you should check out Steinberg's ReBirth software, which emulates the sounds and functions of two Roland TB-303 Bass line modules (which still are the backbone of almost every acid house and trance track) and a Roland TR-808 drum machine, and includes a delay and distortion effect. Considering that TB-303s sell for more than \$1,000 on the used market and the price of TR-808s are currently hovering around \$800, this \$199 software package is quite a bargain. ReBirth will have you writing cool techno tunes in no time, and you can use the program to lay down patterns that you can jam along with on your guitar. ■

311

record buyers. Sure, when there's a mean-spirited attack it pisses me off, and it stings when you read it. But I save them all so I can laugh over their grave one day. What are most of these people's qualifications? Are they at least a one-time fan of the band so they have some legitimate interest in listening to the album, or are they just forced to because it was an assignment? Are they a musician? Why is one critic's opinion more important than anyone else's? I guess I wouldn't be saying this if they liked us more, but you have to move on.

MAHONEY: We'd like everyone to praise us, but we'd rather see a sticker with our logo on someone's skateboard than a ton of good press. We've been playing for a while and have a lot of core fans who don't care what anyone else thinks. They just want to come listen to the music.

HEXUM: There are plenty of critical darlings who can't fill Red Rocks. I'd rather be hated by critics and loved by fans.

MG: Your songs generally have a very positive message, which isn't exactly in fashion right now.

HEXUM: When I get a letter from a fan that says, "I just went through a hard time in my life, and your record is something that pulled me through," that to me is a purpose that transcends entertainment. It's connecting with someone on a deep level. The lyrics are not 100 percent "be happy," but when I write a song about a problem there will invariably be a solution or a positive outcome. I guess that's because we're healthy people. We try to be positive and maintain a good attitude. I would really hate it if my influence was not constructive.

MG: Do you feel that coming from Omaha, Nebraska, had an influence on you?

HEXUM: We expected to have to work hard. People in the Midwest don't expect to take the easy route. We feel that if you work hard you will have a good life. That work ethic influenced us to stick with it, no matter what problems came our way. Musically speaking, all of our influences are from Jamaica, New York, L.A. or England. I can't think of any band that I'd listen to that's from the Midwest. But attitude-wise our background has been a huge influence.

MG: What are some of your biggest musical influences?

HEXUM: The Clash and Bob Marley are some of the biggest ones. I also like the great jazz songwriters like Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer and George Gershwin. On this last album I only did one rap. I'm really getting back into making classic melodies and writing songs that are more timeless. That's the result of me listening to more melodic stuff.

MAHONEY: We all have a lot of the same influences, like the Bad Brains and Bob Marley. We like bands that mix up a lot of different styles, like Urban Dance Squad and Jane's Addiction. I like a lot of the older guitar players like Jerry Garcia, Carlos Santana, John McLaughlin and Jimi Hendrix, and jazz players like John Scofield. To me, jazz players are the ultimate. We also listen to a lot of modern music.

HEXUM: I make a lot of my own trip-hop compilations. There's some really great stuff out there, but there's also a lot of crap. I go through the CDs, extract whatever songs I like onto my hard drive and burn a CD that's my own "best of" compilation. A lot of trip-hop is on compilation records because many of these acts aren't signed. It's just one guy with a computer. But some of it is really creative and cool. There are artists who put together full-length albums that are great. Tricky's first album was a masterpiece. Portishead is great, and so are both Massive Attack albums. I also like the Chemical Brothers quite a bit.

MAHONEY: We're both really into Ernest Ranglin.

HEXUM: I couldn't believe it when I first heard that album. It's an instrumental album with really great, jazz-level players but doing reggae. I love that hollowbody tone that he has. It's classic reggae grooves but with technically skilled players.

MAHONEY: It's like rasta Wes Montgomery.

MG: You put quite a bit of material on the new album, but are there any other directions that you want to explore?

HEXUM: There was one acid jazz and one old-school, straight funk instrumental that didn't make the record. I wanted to put them on there but I got outvoted. We're going to keep expanding, speaking more through melodies than words. ■