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Music & Pop Culture

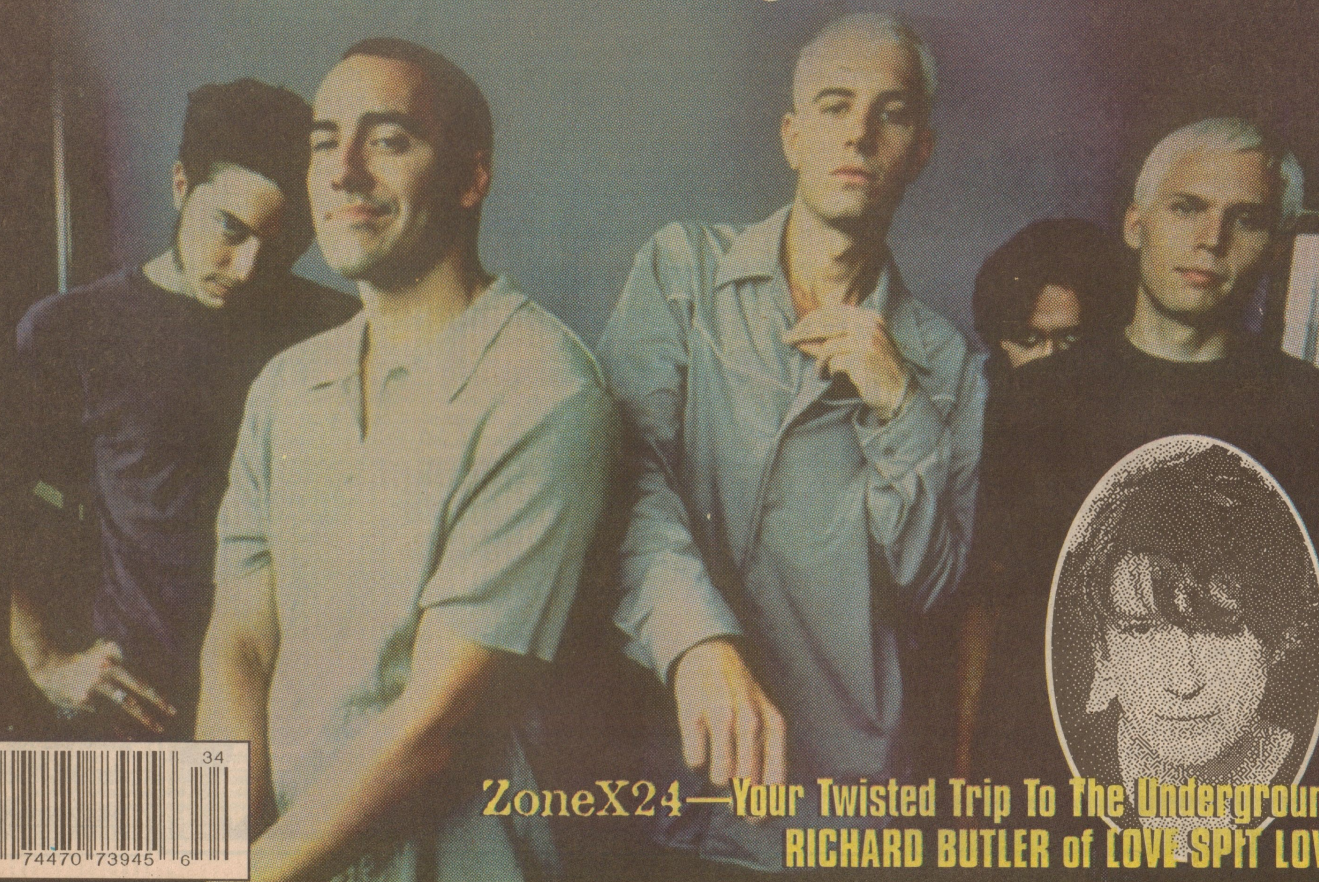
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An Exclusive Interview With



Maintaining The Buzz

by Dan Davis

In the society in which we live, people are constantly looking for a way to cut corners, to take the easy road and the shortcut. In the music world, this happens too often, sometimes by choice, sometimes by happenstance. The lengthy list of "here today and gone tomorrow" could wallpaper the Great Wall Of China. A band that makes it to the top of their respective realm and stays there is as much an endangered species as a doctor that gives house calls.

Nebraska-bred 311 are one of the bands that chose the pure path. With their third album, 1995's self-titled or *Blue Album*, the eclectic quintet who combines metal, reggae, funk and hip-hop finally achieved the commercial success their previous years of hard work had built for them. Powered on the singles, "All Mixed Up" and "Down," the years of endless touring to become the Grateful Dead of the underground scene and a non-compromising work ethic, that album sold close to three million copies worldwide.

As new-found fans of 311 joined together with one of the largest core audiences in the alternative world, Nick Hexum (vocals/guitar), SA Martinez (vocals/scratcher-dj), P-Nut (bass), Tim Mahoney (guitars) and Chad Sexton (drums) got to work for their follow-up. While songs from 311 were still permeating the radio and tv airwaves, the band produced their new record, *Transistor*. 311's latest offering takes their previous successes and runs with them. Those who don't think the band can repeat, the new album's title track and first single helps put those doubts to rest. You can't pigeonhole 311 with any one style and to be this unique, successful and yet melodic is what makes them and *Transistor* a success.

I had the pleasure to speak with bassist P-Nut while he was taking a short rest at his California home before the band hit the road yet again. It was from this conversation I stumbled upon what being in a cult band cum commercial monster is all about and how P-Nut and the other five members of 311 have dealt with the long road

to where they are.

Is this the calm before the storm?

I don't know... It seems pretty stormy already.

What have you been listening to these days?

The new Ween album is great. I've also been listening to a lot of the stuff that came from the funk genre of the early to mid-70s, mostly the Rhino *In Your Face* compilation, all five-and-a-half of those. Man that blows my mind. I listen to that at least once a day. A whole helluva lot of Tom Waits. He'll take you to a place you don't necessarily want to be in. It's not a real happy thing, that's for sure, but man he will floor you if you're up to it.

Just from what I've read and heard about 311, you seem to have the most diverse taste of any of the band members. You listen to everything from Tom Waits to Iron Maiden.

I would like to think so. I can see the Iron Maiden discs right here. Old Maiden. Anything right up to *Powerslave* (laughs).

Well enough about everything else; this has been a pretty eventful year.

Definitely so. We clocked a whole lot of record sales, that's for sure. And the cool thing about that explosion is that a good deal of it happened when we were off the road and we could watch (it). We had stopped touring after October of last year and that's right when everything really kicked in for us.

I went to the release party for the 311 album at the Academy in New York...

...and that was a year before it broke.

Exactly, and that show was packed to the gills with fans that seemed to be very familiar with the band. That was also one of the most diverse crowds I had ever seen.

Yeah. Young, old, rock, reggae. That was a crazy night. We were throwing t-shirts and stuff out of the dressing room window for hours afterwards. There were young people, old people, rock fans, reggae

fans there. It was great.

How does it feel to have made it to this point where you are by doing things on your own terms and through hard work?

I love that and I love when people tell me that too. I think that's true. Especially since I was one of the ones who worked as hard as I did to get us where we are. It feels great to have the media working for us under our own terms. That's the thing that is very, very rare with our careers and the way things have run.

We've been able to do almost everything under our own control and the label's been really cool to us. They never tried to put us into any artistic cages. They never told us to bring back some of those weird styles we were throwing out. They almost always just let us do what we wanted.

Do you think 311 are one of the forefathers, even at your young ages, of the eclectic movement in music being followed by artists such as Squirrel Nut Zippers, Mighty Mighty Bosstones and Ani DiFranco?

That's tough because those bands you named are so different from us. That's probably the point you were trying to make. Of course we're not the only band leading this eclectic revolution of sorts but since there's no real dominating music force right now. It's not a rock world anymore, not like it was. And it certainly isn't a reggae world even though Sublime and 311 would like you to think that, especially off this new album. But it's cool to see bands like Squirrel Nut Zippers and Ani DiFranco busting out different things and having them being accepted by the same types of people. It's really weird.

Growing up did you ever think that a band that you were in would be able to marry two totally different styles such as metal and reggae and be as successful as you are?

Man, I wouldn't have even been able conceptualize that at that age for sure. It would've been like, 'No way!' As a listener to music you can make up so many different ideas of what you think is going on, how

big you think this person is, and in reality it can be so much different. As a kid I never thought seriously that I was gonna get an opportunity to do so. But I knew as a kid that if I did get that opportunity I would give it all I got and really try to put my personality into things. I can sit right back on my couch and feel like I've done that. But as far as looking back, I thought that music was so big I didn't think I would never get any opportunity to say one word on an album, let alone four or five.

It's a total culmination of a life's dream.

Well you pretty much did grow up in this band.

Yeah, I've been in the band since I was 14. It was playing with a different guitarist and a different drummer but we were still being called 311. We transferred the name over and made it make sense within our group of five and it's been really cool.

When Chad and I got together, I knew I wasn't going to let go (laughs) because I knew how great the music he and I had created was.

The band as a whole have grown up together from your teen years to now.

We all went into manhood together (laughs). If taken out of context that can have an entirely different meaning. But that's okay, I'm comfortable with my sexuality (laughs). It's been really cool. Especially when we first got here (Los Angeles) in 1992 we all lived together in a little three bedroom house with a pool and that was the time when we really got to know each other.

How tough was it moving from Nebraska to Los Angeles for you? You must've suffered some sort of culture shock (laughs).

(Laughs) It was pretty shocking but the way that I dealt with it was staying inside. I wasn't old enough to get into clubs even though everyone said that I could get in. Most of the time I would just stay home and get high and concentrate on doing what I wanted to do. It wasn't important to me to go out. Plus I was really intimidated at that young of an age.

What was more intimidating: the city or playing your first show opening for Fugazi?

I was freaked out (opening for them) but I was more on the positive side of anxious than the negative side. It was really cool and I knew that if things started out like this it wasn't going to be too bad. If it went like that then, I knew that it was going to be a career I enjoyed and I've definitely enjoyed everything that has happened so far, even the ugly Winnebago fire (where they lost all their gear while on tour).

That was the lowest point. You can't get any lower than losing everything you own. We knew from that point we were always going to grow and we have.

How was it opening for KISS at Madison Square Garden?

I just barely remember our show. What I remember is KISS. It wasn't as much of a show for us as it was just free tickets to watch KISS (laughs). The crowd was not interested in seeing us, they just wanted KISS.

That was the first time I got to see them with the make-up after growing up with a religious zealot father who wouldn't let me listen to them since he thought their name meant Knights In Satan's Service. Which segues me to another thing which I know you're sick of hearing by now. Rumors have been abounding that your name means KKK or this or that. Please clear it up once and for all.

(Laughs) The greatest thing about the name and the reason why people have to ask questions about it is because it really doesn't have a definition. It is a number and it doesn't pigeonhole us into anything. It's also the reason why you're seeing a lot of other 'numbered' groups turning up, but we're first; I'll say it (laughs).

What about 112 (laughs) who sound just a wee bit similar to you?

112 can suck my dick (laughs). Stealing our idea, basically mirror-imaging our band. That's so funny. They can do their own thing. Everyone knows the truth: that we've been out for seven years.

Are they a 311 tribute band?

(Laughs) It's funny and I would be insecure if I was in that band knowing how things really are. So, whatever, it's cool.

Back to the name, the reason why Morrissey named his band The Smiths is because it really had nothing to do with the music they would create and I don't think names really should or I don't think they can.

It's a word and music is a language that goes beyond words.

But then again there really isn't any one word that can describe 311's music anyway.

Yeah, totally, it makes sense.

The first definition of 311 was an incident when a friend of mine got arrested for skinny dipping in a pool and came home with a ticket that said, '311—indecent exposure' on it. And we were really impressed as you could guess (laughs).

Also knowing a little numerology and studying a little magic, which I do, in some factions three is man and 11 is magic. So it's like a 'mugician' kind of thing? (laughs).

(Laughs) I think you just keep making up little things to keep people wondering (laughs).

(Laughs) Yeah, we can do that and say that we've been saying it for years. It goes a million different directions and that's why the name really stuck for us and we knew it was the right one.

Touring as much as you guys do, do you ever get burnt out from playing live shows?

It's a trying experience but since we have done it as long as we have, we know what to expect. Since we are in a certain role of power, like we're running the motherfucking show now, there's really almost nothing to worry about. Of course there are the little things but most everything as opposed to when we were starting and took care of everything ourselves, almost everything is taken care of by our stage manager or road manager or the production manager. The problems are taken care of by them and we do get the opportunity and the luxury to just sit back and watch everything happening. If there's a problem that needs our attention we're right there but all the little problems we don't even see.

Climb on the bus and chill out.

Yeah. We need to relax and just concentrate on the show and maintain relationships with girlfriends, get a nice long phone bill and take care of yourself. Read a little bit, catch a buzz, watch a movie, sound-check, go to catering. Which by the way we're taking out our own this year which is an unbelievable luxury which I thought would never happen. I had my first meal with the cook the other night and it was

Are you afraid of losing the underground status and/or street credibility that you've worked so hard to build now that you're also a commercial success?

Definitely. It's not at the forefront of our problems because we know that the integrity is still there. The reason why we released "Transistor" as the first single is to do that. To preserve our hardcore following. The people that do love 311 for what 311 really is are going to love that song. And the reason why it hasn't been embraced by America is because it is a little bit weird.

We released it for our fans definitely. That's basically it. Anybody that has been listening to us for years understands how the music is kind of jumpy like that and separated like a rock/dance hall riff.

The album has gotten some poor reviews in the early going. Does that bother you at all?

I just think it's great when the critics don't like it or it hasn't been embraced by MTV. It's cool. It just shows that we do have a certain amount of integrity and we are doing something that is unique enough that it can't be embraced by all of America.

You had said in an interview which I read late last year, 'I think we're gonna get pretty weird on this one. We're just going to throw as many styles as we can into the mix.' Did everything turn out as per your initial game plan?

Well I actually expected a little more out of myself on this album. I should've written something really, really, really weird. I wrote something that was pretty normal and my usual role is to write something that is weird so in a way I kind of grew up and tried to write something that was mature instead of something that was more show-offy.

I changed my mind since that interview. I wanted to write something that did go into the mood of this album and I knew that this album was going to be more relaxed than our previous works had been. So I wrote more of a relaxed song.

I know it's kind of premature but what do we have to look forward to on the next album?

I'll probably have to say the same thing about the next album. I'm going to go nuts on the next album because *Transistor* is kind of more controlled than any of our other things have been.

I was probably talking about the fifth album and not *Transistor*, but didn't know it at the time (laughs).

It's a really fun band to be in because we do these kinds of things. We're not afraid to try new things and we don't feel pressure to getting pigeonholed like I said earlier.

What is the level you would like 311 to get to or to peak?

It's there. It's beyond any expectation I ever realistically had, so I never really dreamed I would be looking over Laurel Canyon like I am doing right now. I'm already beyond reality.

It's not a bad thing, it's just that I never had the audacity to believe we would be a double-platinum band. I always thought we were just going to be this obscure little Frank Zappa-like band that was just enjoyed by a certain amount of people. And that would've been fine with me. And success is fine with me too. I'm not bitching about it, that's for sure!

It's maintenance. You have to maintain the integrity and we've still got to sell a certain amount of records. And if it doesn't happen I'm sure we'll be disappointed but it doesn't mean we're going to stop working. We've worked this hard and if we fall upon hard times again, we're just going to be that more hardcore about it.

We're going to fucking dominate for 20 years and whether people will be able to accept that or not is going to be what the future holds. In

some people's opinion that won't be true but in mine it will be because I'm going to be here working my ass off until I can't do it anymore. This is what I love and there's no way that I can't do it. If I do it with \$100,000 in the bank or \$10, it doesn't matter because I've been thorough both and I know what it takes to do both and in the long run it doesn't really matter because I'm just making music. How do you like that? (laughs).



magnifique (laughs) so I'm looking forward to gaining a little weight on the road instead of losing about 10 pounds (laughs).

Touring as much as 311 does, you also have to either love each other like a family or hate each other by now.

Oh, it's definitely a family atmosphere. We have no choice but to be like family and knowing each other and going through what we all have together; it's just made that bond that much stronger.