

311's New Transistor: a Solid State of Mind

MANY people first heard of multiform rock band 311 in 1996, when "Down" and "All Mixed Up," from their self-titled album of the previous year, became huge hits. Despite the fact that 311 had previously released two fine albums—1993's *Music* and 1994's *Grassroots*—most folks needed the prompting of their radio and of their MTV before they noticed that, yeah, these five guys are pretty damn good.

But not me. I had become a fan much earlier—1992, in fact—when through sheer luck I happened to stumble upon the band soon after their arrival in California.

Typical of Los Angeles, the day of my introduction to 311 was a sunny one. And like most days back in the early '90s, I didn't have much to do. So when a publicist for Capricorn Records called and invited me to a six-song lunchtime showcase for this unknown group 311—an invitation that included the always-enticing "Free Food and Drinks"—well, you didn't have to ask me twice.

But this mid-day trip to a nondescript North Hollywood rehearsal studio was worth far more than the deli tray and the cans of Coke that lured me there. You could even say it changed my life.

When the band—vocalists Nick Hexum and SA Martinez, guitarist Tim Mahoney, bassist P-Nut, drummer Chad Sexton—began to play their amazing blend of hard rock, reggae, hip hop and funk, I dropped my sandwich and my jaw and, seemingly in a trance, wandered up to the front of the makeshift stage where, for the next half hour, I saw one of the best live performances of my life.

Since then, I've seen 311 (which takes their name from the police code for indecent exposure) a few dozen times, from their long-hair days headlining the Coconut Teaser to a radio festival in Arizona last year before 20,000 screaming kids: to the KROQ Almost-Acoustic Christmas at stately Universal Amphitheater one night; to the shady, 200-capacity Opium Den in Hollywood the very next evening.

ALL OF WHICH LEADS US TO NORTH HOLLYWOOD'S NRG Studios, where this past Spring I spoke to all five members of 311 as they were putting the finishing touches on one of this year's best rock releases, *Transistor*, which debuted on *Billboard*'s Top 200 album chart last month at No. 4.

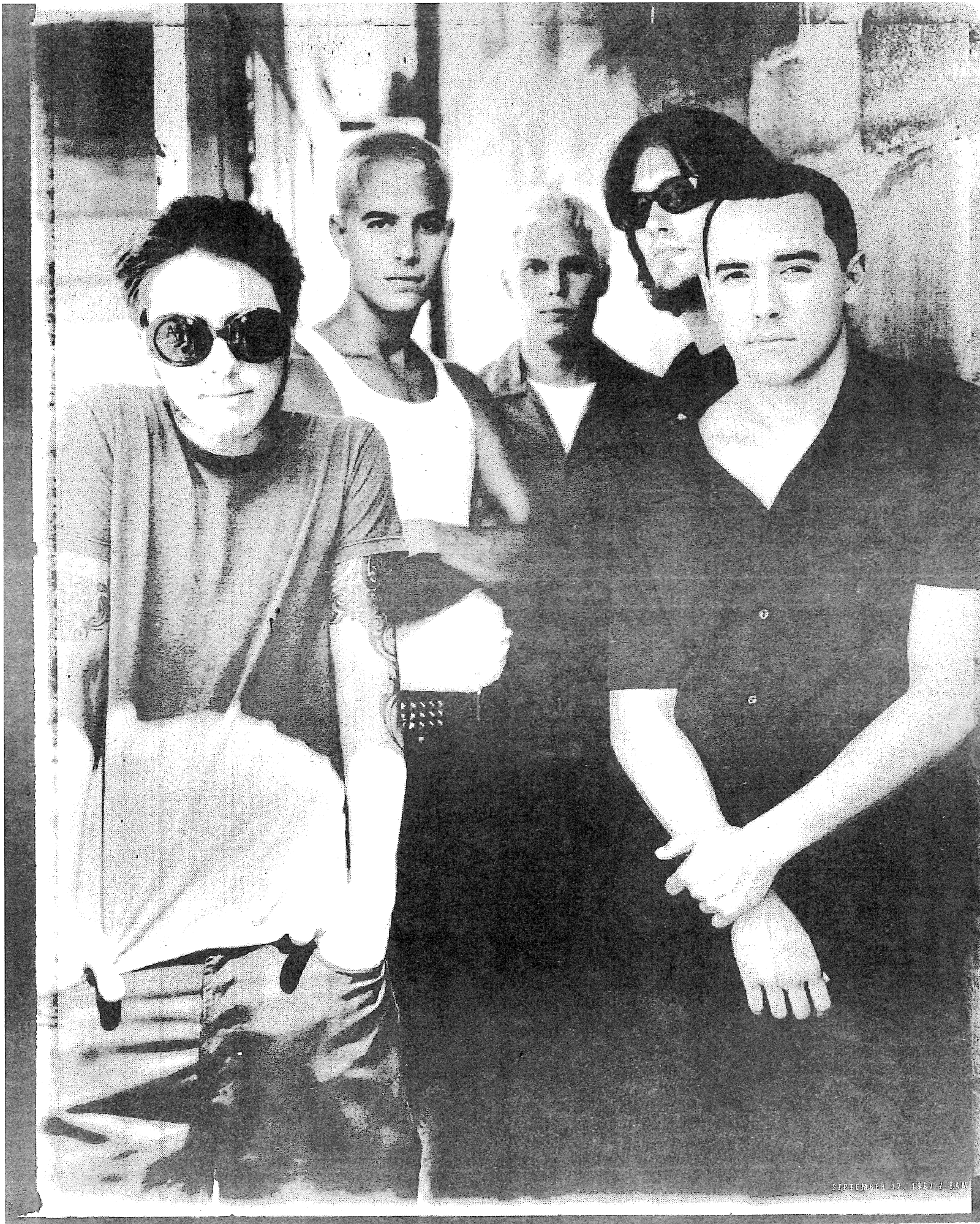
After being less than thrilled with the way their previous three albums sounded, the five members of 311 (who all hail originally from Omaha, NE, three from one high school, two from another) put themselves in charge of producing *Transistor*, a task they shared only with Scott "Scotch" Ralston, their long-time live sound engineer and good friend.

Ralston has been involved with the band since before they released *Music*, when he engineered the demo tapes that the band made for Capricorn.

"There was a little less pressure" in the studio this time, says Sexton. "We were totally comfortable. It was all done in-house...nobody knows our sound better than Scott. Through the years, we had him doing more and more for us. Like on *Grassroots*, he and I did the drums together. This time we didn't even give what we were doing a second thought. [The recording] was almost automatic."

"When a band has success, like we did with the [last] album, they've earned the right to call their own shots on their next record," says Hexum. "With some bands, that would be a death sentence, because they'd get self-indulgent, not having anyone to keep them straight. But I think we have that effect on each other. If people can't be open and tell the other guy in the band, 'I think you can do this better,' then you need a producer. But we do that for each other."

By Troy J. Augusto





"This album is a reflection of us listening to more reggae than we've ever listened to before. We think people should listen to more reggae!"

—P-NUT

"This is a time when we're really comfortable doing everything ourselves," adds Mahoney. "With the help of Scotch!"

"We had good experiences on our first and our third records working with outside producers," says Hexum, who names the Clash as his all-time favorite band. "But Scott had earned the right to produce us by totally dedicating his life to working with our band. And we're really into repaying that loyalty."

They gave themselves a couple months to record 14 songs for the new record (which was almost called "Elimination"), but because of all the new material that everyone had written—some of which goes back to 1995, after the band's tour with Cypress Hill—and because the recording went smoother than anyone had imagined, they ended up setting down 35 songs. Of those tunes, 21 are included on the new album,

filling the CD with nearly the maximum amount of music that'll fit on one disc.

Transistor also includes a nifty interactive feature, a hidden instrumental track that can be found before the first song. Here's how it works. First, go buy the CD, then insert it into your CD player. Next, hit play, and once the music starts, push your CD player's rewind button until it rewinds past the beginning of the first track, back to the start of the mystery tune, which is known to fans as "Intro," because 311 used to start their concerts with it. (Curiously, now that they've released a recording of "Intro," they no longer play it live.)

LIKE THE BAND'S THREE PREVIOUS major-label albums (they also released three indie records before signing with Capricorn: *Hydroponic*, *Unity* and *Dammit*), *Transistor* is a musical roller coaster of styles and moods, a wild and ambitious ride that never settles into one groove or vibe. One musical form that's more prominent this time out, though, is Jamaican reggae, which may also account for the relative ease with which the new album was recorded.

"You have to be really down in the dumps to be depressed playing reggae," says bassist P-Nut, so nicknamed by a friend because of his unusually shaped head. "We were happy the whole time! Anyway, it had

been two years since we had recorded, so we were really excited. That's why we wrote so many songs, and that's why we're putting out as many as we want!"

"There's definitely more reggae-styled singing," says Martinez. "And that was something we were conscious of doing. It goes back to when we were touring in Europe, listening to a lot of dub reggae. And I think we captured our interpretation of it."

"It's a modern interpretation of reggae," adds P-Nut, "and that's what we wanted to do. It should be respected that way. This album is a reflection of us listening to more reggae than we've ever listened to before. We

think people should listen to more reggae!"

Preparation also played a large part in the successful recording of *Transistor*. The band was determined not to repeat past mistakes, such as not taking enough time to rehearse material before recording it. "I think we were more confident this time," says guitarist Mahoney. "Rehearsing so much before we came into the studio bred confidence."

"Once you get in the mode, you get this momentum going," says Hexum, who runs his own clothing line as a side job. "We got more confident as we went. Playing over a hundred shows a year for the past four years got us into the musical shape that we are today."

"And we had tunnel vision, working everyday," says Sexton. "It was a mission and it was a lot of work...but we were all really focused. This has been my dream, to just come into the studio and do it ourselves. I think it was great. That's not to say that we won't be happy to work with other people [in the future]. But this has been one of my dreams come true."

As with every 311 album, the songs on the new one run the musical gamut—from the in-your-face funk attack of "What Was I Thinking" to the building intensity of "Use of Time." From the spacey bent and jazzy chords of "Inner Light Spectrum" to the complexities of "Starshines."

"And SA kicked ass on 'Creature Feature,'" says Hexum. "That song is about self-doubt and is really aching, and I think it's the best thing he's written to date. It's different than any song I've ever heard before."

"There's so much variety on the new album," says Sexton. "For me, songs are like food. I love all food, all varieties! To us it's all fresh."

"I try and write about what I think about, and what I experience and what I know," says the 6-foot, 3-inch Hexum, who took his girlfriend on an ocean cruise once *Transistor* was finished. "There's definitely a variety of things [on the new album], including a couple of songs about the message behind the 'transistor' concept, of us all being of the same energy force."

He explains: "People don't usually think of it this way, but our nerves are all basically electrical, current-carrying wires, and we're all transistors of that exact same electrical force that's constantly being exchanged. All of our thoughts, all of our actions, everything comes down to the exchange of charge. So it's basically saying we're all transistors of the same electrical force."

"I've never been a preachy, spiritual person or anything, but to me that's my spiritual belief, that we're all connected by the same life force. Everything is connected, and these differences that people place between each other are just made up and they're just bullshit. It may take a lot of listening to the music to figure out what I mean. But it's always been the same positive message—respecting other people because they're really just you, you know what I mean?"

"You can't just listen to 'Transistor' once and love it right off the bat," offers Sexton, in a bit of an understatement. "Most people can't. You have to hear that song a few times before you start understanding where we're coming from."

The folks at NRG know where 311 is coming from, to be sure. It took workers four full days to remove all of the marijuana dust and residue that had settled on the studio's expensive recording equipment while the band was there. Mixing boards had to be opened up and brushed clean. Doors were opened to finally allow some fresh air in. And the sign bearing the band's recording motto, "Work-Free Drug Zone," was taken off the wall.

"The place will never be the same," said one of NRG's engineers as he watched 311's crew remove the last of their equipment.

Before saying good-bye to the studio, the band gathered their recording crew and a few other friends and toasted the happy completion of the album with glasses of champagne and bong hits. "This is to all of us!" exclaimed Mahoney.

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AFTER TWO WARM-UP SHOWS in Hawaii with Wu-Tang Clan and others at the annual Melele Festival, 311 celebrated the release of *Transistor* with a concert at San Diego's Hospitality Point, a scenic, park-like venue with a view of the Pacific that was an ideal choice for the band to kick off their U.S. tour. Before the show, jet skis and other pleasure craft sped by while crew members swam in the cool ocean water.

Opening with their mega-hit "Down" (perhaps to get it out of the way?), 311 tore through a 23-song set that featured songs from all four of their Capricorn albums, though surprisingly they only played five tunes from the new one, the best of which was "Light Years," a smooth reggae number. They also did a cover of the stoner gem "Who's Got the Herb," which they contributed to 1995's *Hempilation* compilation.

"Let's start this shit out proper," said Hexum, before launching into song number two: "Freak Out," a fan fave from the *Music* album.

All five members appeared relaxed and excited before the show, chatting with friends, rolling fat joints, stretching and otherwise getting prepared for what will be the biggest tour of their seven-year existence. They had recently returned from Europe, where they played out some of the new material in front of a live audience for the first time.

"This is weird," said Mahoney, the band's confirmed Deadhead, glancing out their tour bus window toward the bustling backstage area and the stage rigging that holds their massive production. "All of this is for us!" Not to mention the enthusiastic 6,000-plus fans who showed up!

"And this bus is a lot better than those Euro buses," added P-Nut, who happily stretched his long, tattooed limbs on the spacious vehicle just before showtime.

A number of LA friends made the two-hour drive down the Interstate 5 freeway to the show, including folks from NRG, as well as band members' girlfriends and long-time pal Tony Kanal, bassist from No Doubt. "Their new stage show is great," exclaimed Tony after the concert.

The regular set's finale of "Feels So Good"—arguably the band's best live song—was enhanced by 10 minutes of perfectly timed fireworks from nearby Sea World, the perfect end to the show. A two-song encore climaxed with "Fat Chance," better known to fans as "Fuck the Bullshit."

DESPITE THE FACT THAT ALL five guys have lived here in Los Angeles for nearly six years, 311 continues to be known as an Omaha band. But that may be about to change, because *Transistor* is full of references—both subtle

and obvious, positive and negative—to LA. "In writing [the songs] for this album," notes Martinez, while sitting in the front room of his rented Hollywood Hills home, just before the band left for their Spring tour of Europe, "I wanted to write things that we hadn't talked about before. We hadn't talked about the culture of LA, and what it's like to live here."

"It's hard to make a direct link between the city you live in and your music," says Sexton, who's lately been getting his share of much-deserved "Best Young Drummer" nods from many of the professional drum magazines.

"Any city you live in definitely changes you as a person," Sexton says, "and any city has its good and bad—sometimes it's good here and sometimes it's bad. We moved out here in '92 and I'm sure we've changed as people. There's so much more information out here and so many more options, so maybe you learn and grow at a quicker pace."

"My take on LA is that it's culturally on the cutting edge," adds Martinez. "LA has got a lot of things going on, a lot of ideas flowing throughout the city. We haven't really been here that long, but I can sense a change in the city from when we first got here. It seemed a lot more calm and laid back."

"There are days I wanna leave LA/I wanna break out of the maze/Escape the dark haze"—from "Borders"

"I wrote that song after Chad and I got off the phone one day," says Martinez. "We were talking about how this town is fucking crazy. Everyone out here is going non-stop and sometimes you feel a lot of tension in the air. And then you see the effects of all these people, the smog and shit like that."

"Sometimes I'm like, 'Fuck, man, this shit sucks!' Sometimes I'd like to be in a place where it's more serene, maybe more tranquil. But then I guess I'd be disconnecting myself from the people, and that's what's great about this town."

THE FOURTH SHOW OF THE TOUR was at one of the band's favorite U.S. venues, the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Morrison, CO, near Denver. In fact, when 311 moved to LA, they stopped at Red Rocks and talked about their dream to one day play there. Now they've played the historic natural amphitheater two summers in a row, selling out the spectacular venue both times.

The Denver-Boulder area has long been one of 311's best draws, so it wasn't surprising that fans showed up hours early for this show. Despite a day-long dark cloud cover that occasionally dropped light rain on the partying faithful, the parking lot was alive with anticipation, as well as the sound

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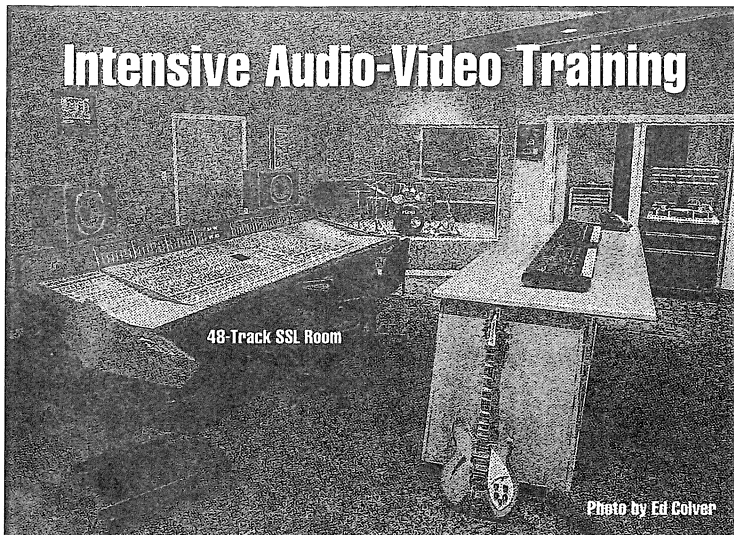
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of the band's four albums, which could be heard booming from a number of vehicles. (Nearby University of Colorado-Boulder was recently named the fourth biggest party school in the country.) Some of the revelers reported that they came from as far away as Omaha and Phoenix to see this show, not to mention from Los Angeles.

With the bright, flickering lights of Denver creating a brilliant vista in the distance beyond the stage, 311 played a powerful Red Rocks show that put the tour's opening night to shame. Looking back at that first show of the tour in San Diego, the band members appeared nervous and tentative. But that wasn't the case at Red Rocks, where they played a whopping 26 songs, including "8:16 AM," a bouncy tune of freedom and happiness that perfectly summed up the vibe of the gig.

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—CHAD SEXTON

"This is not a rebel song," said Hexum, in reference to U2 singer Bono's famous words at Red Rocks in 1983. "This song is 'All Mixed Up.'"

A review of the show titled, "311 Sounds Sunny on Drizzly Night," in the *Denver Post* compared the band's "corn-fed punk/funk" to everyone from Green Day and the Police to the Everly Brothers.

"The amount of pot smoking in the crowd was phenomenal," wrote the reviewer, "even by Red Rocks' prodigious standards."

In the backstage area (which is really just a big red cave with lights) after the show, a number of family members (P-Nut's mom, Sexton's cousin) and friends in from Omaha (where the band rarely play anymore) greeted the five exhausted boys—who at that point had a 26-hour bus ride to Cleveland ahead of them—and congratulated them on an excellent performance.

"Nope, neither me nor his mother have any musical talent," answers a proud Tom Mahoney, when asked where his son Tim gets his skill with the guitar. "He doesn't get it from us!"

"Yeah, this place is great," said Sexton while shaking hands with an endless line of well-wishers. "We love playing here."

"When we see a large crowd," Hexum

told me in 1994, "it's a really moving experience. The live setting—making people dance and have fun—is what music is for, and it's what makes what we do satisfying."

OF COURSE, IT GOES WITHOUT saying that not everyone is impressed by 311's eclectic brand of party tuneage. *Entertainment Weekly* recently dismissed the band's new album, giving it a rare "F" rating. *Rolling Stone* magazine, which didn't even bother to review any of the group's previous three releases, says the album "drags on forever, aimlessly."

And witness the *Chicago Tribune*'s historic display of ignorance and bad taste. In its one-star review of the album it mistakenly called "Fly Transistor," the paper says, "The reggae, funk and hip-hop grooves are churned out with wedding-band competence, and the rap vocals are a major annoyance, closer in tone to Vanilla Ice than Eric B. and Rakim."

But such barbs have never really bothered the band, who always prefer to take the high road when addressing the unavoidable negativity that's sometimes thrown their way. From the new album's "Jupiter": "One thing I've got to say before sales die/Stay positive and love your life." Or, more directly, from "All Mixed Up": "Fuck the naysayers 'cause they don't mean a thing."

After all, this is a band who survived the fiery destruction of their tour van and all of their equipment during their first-ever U.S. tour. They've also survived a ridiculous rumor that the name 311 is a reference to the KKK—because K is the 11th letter of the alphabet. For a time, 311 T-shirts were even banned in Omaha schools.

"I was going to write a song called 'Fuck the KKK,' says Hexum. "But then I realized that that would be a negative statement. And I don't want their name on the cover of our record, because that's giving them juice, giving them attention. Rather than answer the negative statement that was made about us with another negative statement, we just say, 'No, that's not true. The reality is that we're down for this,' and just leave it at that."

"We were always sure something good was going to happen with the band," says Sexton when asked to sum up the group's fortunes.

"We've never gone backwards since we started, y'know? Our fans keep growing, our shows are always getting bigger. We still have markets we need to grow into, like Europe. But that's great, it's just another challenge for us." ★

Enter the "Work-Free Drug Zone" with 311 when they hit the Greek Theater on September 25th