

P-Funky

P-Nut, as most people call 311 bassist Aaron Wills, is a man on a mission. We ask him about his plans to deliver the groove to the people

Pop, rock, pop-rock – whatever 311 do, people like it a lot. Ten million or so album sales since the Nebraska-raised quartet formed in 1988, the band have stamped

their mark on American musical culture without ever becoming too commercial. Together, the musicians – Nick Hexum (vocals, guitar), Doug Martinez (DJ), Tim Mahoney (guitar), Aaron Wills (bass) and Chad Sexton (drums) – have delivered 13 albums, the latest of which, *Voyager*, keeps the train a-rolling nicely with its radio-friendly textures.

Perhaps at odds with the band's choice of music, bassist Wills – apparently nicknamed 'P-Nut' because of the shape of his cranium, although you'd have to ask him for details – is a monster of a bass player. He specialises in insanely complex funk lines straight from the Bootsy and Flea school, although of course he usually backs off to serve the songs. How did such a talent emerge, we want to know...

From the outside, being in 311 looks like a lot of fun.

It's such a fun project, especially that it's so long term and we get to do what we want as much as possible. That's what our fans have given us – but I think we can still take more advantage of it. I listened to the new Tool and Baroness albums, and there's so much room for creative expression in the present tense right now.

Are you happy with your new album?

Yes, I love *Voyager*, but as it was coming out, I was thinking, gosh, I wish we had a few more months on it. There were a few things I would have loved to have done, but it was all about hitting the summer tour

in the States, and making sure that there was new music that we could play for our audience and not have it be the same set a few years in a row.

You play some pretty funky bass parts. How do they come about?

Usually Nick and Chad will come up with fixed ideas. They know exactly what they want to do. The stuff that Chad writes has always been my catnip – I've got to have it. Tim creates amazing lines too – his bass-line to 'What The?!!' was just me holding down the groove that he came up with. The challenge came down to me playing it the way that I play it, and making it float. It's a really fun experiment.

This many albums in, are you playing bass the same way you used to?

I'm definitely more laid-back. For sure, I play fewer notes than when I was so aggressive and a 'You've got to hear what I've got to say' kind of kid. That's what's great about being a 20-something in a recording band, and touring too. It's 'Look what I can do. I can play a thousand notes'. I'll find a way to keep the boring things interesting, or the routine things fresh, by changing a technique here and there, or adding a note. I get a lot of freedom in the band and they allow me to be myself to a very high degree. A strong bass influence has always been a part of the band, and I think you hear that a lot in *Voyager*.

I watched a bunch of your live solos on YouTube. Has that part changed at all?

What's funny is I don't remember the first time I did it. There had to be a first time, obviously, when the guys were like, 'Hey, get your ass out onstage and do whatever you want', because I'm that guy in the band, I want to play all the songs. To be able

to tap and to loop and to have access to an extended-range bass, they're all just more paintbrushes in my box that I can use.

You have a highly evolved slap technique.

I love Mark King, I love stealing his ideas. Technique-wise, if you're going to play slap, you've got to understand what he did with two-hand slap in the 80s, and how effortless he made it. With that style, you're playing drums, man. You've passed beyond the bass to playing drums. I'm endlessly influenced by the English DNA in my blood, and whatever's in the water in the UK in general.

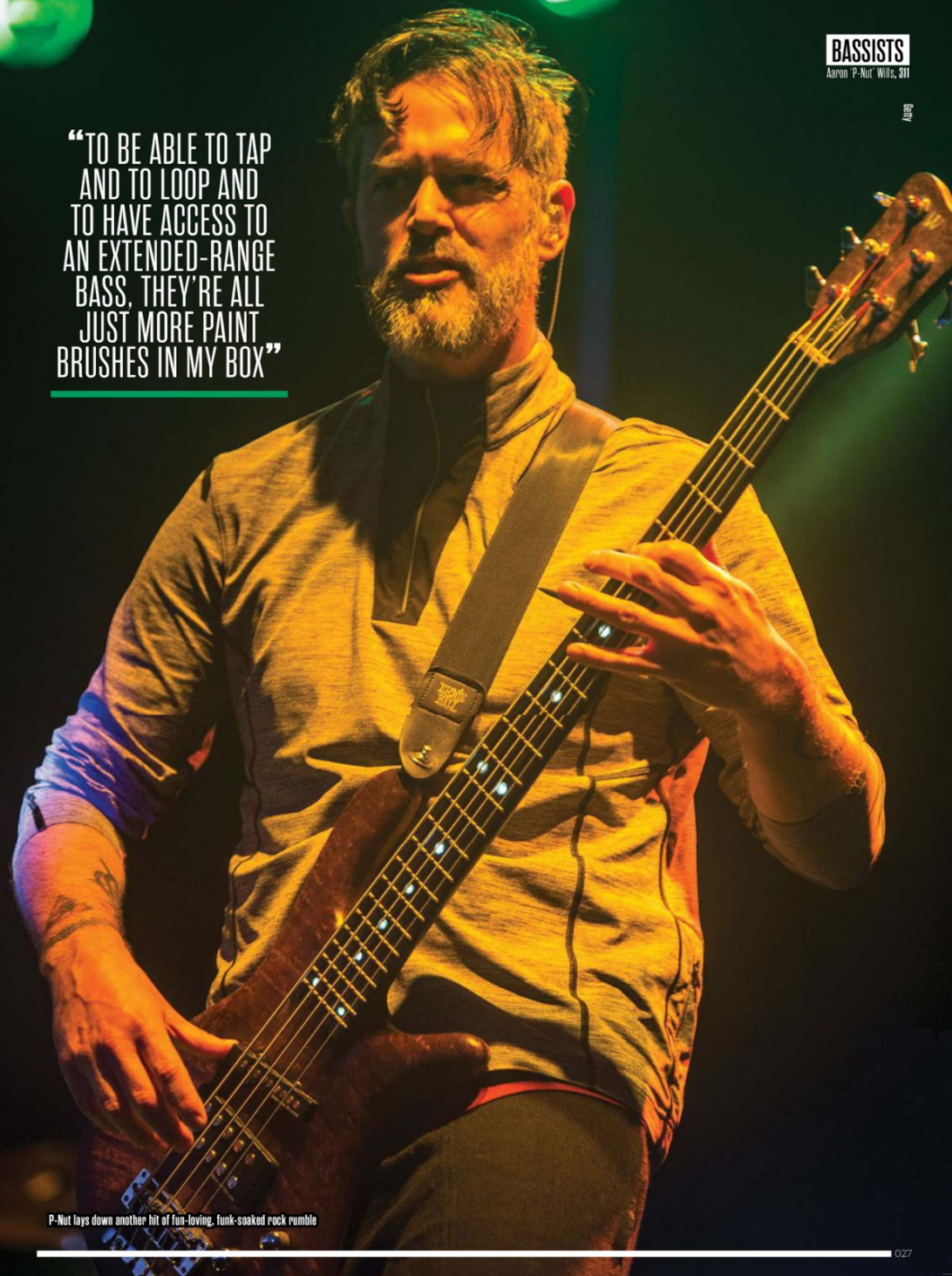
You've had a signature Warwick for some years now.

I've got a few different versions. We started making them in 2004; the first one was a French walnut. I loved that bass, it felt like the one true ring for me. In my head, in my very silly head, I was like, 'No-one is going to play this bass better than me. It was made for me, it's got my name on it, I don't care if there's 70 other ones just like it, it's still my bass. I don't care'. It was really fun. It was a big ego boost and a professional pat on the back from the guys at Warwick. It was fantastic, and to see other musicians playing that instrument really makes me happy. My main one is the third version, a buckeye burl that came out in 2008, and I've recorded with it ever since. It's a five-string with a drop tuner on the B string so I can go to low A, which I do a lot. It's my main live and studio bass. I don't know what I'll do with it when and if I retire it.

How many basses do you take out on a given tour?

I took eight out on this run. I've got the 30th anniversary cherry four-string, which is an incredible bass. That thing's

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P-Nut lays down another hit of fun-loving, funk-soaked rock rumble

BASSISTS

Aaron 'P-Nut' Wills, 311

Barry

insane. It was a 30-year-old piece of wood that Warwick got the first year that they started manufacturing in Markneukirchen and they just never used it. It was just sitting in their stock. I got number five, and I put purple LEDs in it. It's got to be the fastest bass I own, so I use that for solos and warming up. I try and play it on other songs, but I need the low B so much that it's hard to find room for a four-string in the set. So I've got that, I've got my fretless five-string, all bubinga, and then I've got my main, and my backup main. I didn't bring my 10-strings, but I brought my Star Bass, the semi-acoustic. It was known as the Nashville when Framus was making it. It was Bill Wyman's bass back in the day – what a cool bass. And then I brought my Jack Bruce Anniversary bass, which is incredible. It looks like an SG.

Did you ever get to meet Jack?

No, I never got a chance. I did get the chance to meet Chris Squire, maybe the first or second week of being in Los Angeles. They were playing at the Roxy and Eddie Offord, who produced their first couple of albums, was working with us. He introduced me to one of the few people that are a lot taller than me, and that was Chris Squire. He was an absolute gentleman, with giant hands. I think I stole a little bit of his gift by pressing the flesh.

What other gear do you use?

For amps and cabs, I'm Warwick. I've had them for, God, who knows, maybe 12 years now, and I beat them up every summer and they love it. They ask for more. I've had to change out a few tones, and the outsides of the cabinets have been more or less destroyed, but I've got very low serial numbers and it's fun being a product tester with those guys. Other than that, I love Electro-Harmonix. I'll always have a Big Muff on my rig. I love MXR and Dunlop, their analogue bass effects. I love their digital bass effects too. I've got an MXR Envelope on my rig at all times. I just recently added a Phase 90, the tiny little one, which I still can't believe they can do in such a small format. I always had a chorus and I never really liked it that much, so the phaser seems to make so much more sense. I put that on almost everything.

Have you always been a keen effects user?

I definitely started out as a guy that didn't want to have pedals, but I loved Cliff Burton's influence, especially in



'Anesthesia', like, how did he do that? He had a Big Muff and was just playing the shit out of it, and he was smarter than everybody in the room, so I'm going to try and do that. Ever since our first album, we've had fuzz bass in one way or another on pretty much every album. As far as producers, when we worked with Bob Rock, he sat down with me and my pedalboard and he did these tiny little adjustments, and they made all the difference in the world. I don't know if I'll ever see anyone knob-twiddle to that masterful degree ever again, so props to Bob Rock. He's a genius.

What got you started on bass?

I really loved what Metallica was doing as far as thrash metal, and what Iron Maiden was doing with heavy metal and hard rock, and how the bass was like an equal player in both of those bands. More so Iron Maiden, because Steve wrote everything, and less so in Metallica because they put Cliff so low in the mix. It was a crying shame. They stomped on his sound. Losing Cliff was hard. I remember that day, even though I was 10 or 12, something like that.

Did you take lessons on bass?

I started on violin when I was seven, and played that for four years, and then moved over to bass at 11. Then I started taking lessons with older local musicians, and they were always like, 'Bring in your favourite song, and let's work on the music that you're listening to'. I thought that was the coolest teaching technique, because I'm instantly relating to it. I'm not playing some shit that I can't relate to. You want to do what you want to do, especially as a teenager, so I brought in the Red Hot Chili Peppers' 'If You Want Me To Stay', because that bass-line was blowing my mind. He was like, 'This is great, but check out Sly & The Family Stone's version', and I was like, 'Oh my gosh!' How large Larry Graham

looms in our world. He's definitely on Mount Rushmore, and to have been in the same room with him and watched him play bass at Warwick was just amazing. He's one of those guys you can't say anything to unless you have to. I was just standing in the room, just smiling that he was there, talking about bass, him and Verdine from Earth, Wind And Fire.

What was your first bass guitar?

I had a P-Bass copy by a company called Phantom. It was, whatever, a hundred bucks, in 1984 or '85.

It was a great bass. I loved it. I got a Fender Jazz Special, which I wish I still had, a couple of years later, and it was incredible. It was a Christmas present, and I was just thrilled and locked myself in my room with it. I even remember the smell of the case: it came in one of those cool Fender tweed cases. It was unbelievable, and definitely felt like a pro instrument. After that, I don't know why I got away from the Fender, because I loved that Precision-Jazz combo sound. Even back then, I was like, 'This is thicker, this is better, this is punchier', but I moved on to a G&L. I had an L-1000, which was incredible. I loved that bass.

Why make the switch from Fender?

Well, that's when I was really getting into my Flea influence. I was like, 'I need more midrange and less refinement and more raw power'. That's what I wanted. Fenders were sophisticated, but the G&L was like some brash kid demanding your attention. And then I got rid of that and I got an Ibanez Saber, and that's what I recorded our first album with. They made Sabers for just a couple of years, '88 to '91, and I've got one now. I played it for a retro set that we did at 311 Day, where we played all the old songs that we played in the garage back in the day. We put on old clothes and put up posters on the wall that were there. It was great. It's so cool to have the carpenters in Las Vegas make you something, like, 'Hey, we've got this crazy idea', and they're like, 'That's not crazy. It'll take a day, but we can do this'. Put up some ugly walls and make it look like the basement again. It was really cool.

There's a lesson there.

I like it when we're creative like that, and we've got our minds focused not on what people won't like, but instead, we're 'We know you're going to like this'. Be confident about it. It comes off better. ■

Voyager is out now on BMG. Info: www.311.com.