

## NOISE

DOUBLING  
DOWN ON  
311

*Veteran rockers reflect  
on 20 years and hunt for  
new label*

PATRICK FLANARY

The place isn't hard to find: Just look for the rainbow. Its spray-painted spectrum, weathered and sprawled along the length of a concrete building off 64th Avenue, has been known to lead certain musicians to gold records.

Beyond the music shop facade, down the hall of wall-to-wall guitars and past piles of drums, a modest setup of microphones and vintage equipment showcases an unsung Omaha, Neb., landmark. This back room at Rainbow Recording Studios once hosted Willie Nelson. American Idol winner Jordin Sparks cut a record here not long ago. And it was at this studio, in July 1991, that the guy in charge convinced local band 311 to put its songs to tape.

"I badgered them into recording at a real studio," remembers Nils Anders Erickson, Rainbow's founder. "I told them if they were going to press a thousand CDs they'd better keep the quality up, or it would haunt them the rest of their musical life." Erickson fronted the band \$2,000 to cover the session.

Twenty years later, the funky reggae parties known as 311 regularly sell out shows and have moved almost 10 million albums. The group's promotion of peace and positivity through live music culminates every two years on March 11—"311 Day"—an event that draws some 15,000 spectators from all 50 states. Next week, the band will play its biennial blowout at Las Vegas's Mandalay Bay.

"The only way you can really screw yourself as a musician is to think you've got it all figured out," says 311 frontman Nick Hexum.

That's why he and his reggae-rap architects returned to the drawing board with a new mentor in 2008. *Uplifter*, the band's ninth album, finds longtime Metallica producer Bob Rock pushing 311 beyond its comfort zone. While the group hasn't left behind its trademark approach to songs, the rap-rock style isn't leading the charge this time around.

"Too Much Too Fast" emphasizes guitarist Tim Mahoney's soaring tropical riffs over a shuffling Beatlesque time signature. P-Nut's rich bass throbs in time with Chad Sexton's

MYRIAN SANTOS-KAYDA



After 20 years and 10 million albums, 311 frontman Nick Hexum has earned the right to rock plaid pants.

brilliantly precise backbeat on the textured ballads "Golden Sunlight" and "Two Drops in the Ocean." These softer gems highlight the harmonies between Hexum and 311 co-leader S.A. Martinez and allow a break from the band's more formulaic output of songs like "Hey You," a single suited for those content with the familiar, radio-friendly side of 311.

"There's plenty of 311 fans that say, 'Just do the heavy stuff,'" says Hexum. "The truth is that we have to make music that's just from the heart. You can't make music by a focus group."

"If we were just the same band every record, maybe we wouldn't even be a band anymore," admits drummer and songwriter Chad Sexton. "I think the last one is the most formu-

lated musically on the songs, but in a good way, a way that 311 absolutely needed."

While Los Angeles bands Fishbone and Red Hot Chili Peppers drew up the funk-metal blueprint in the early '80s, 311 pioneered and popularized the call-and-response, double-frontman concept of the '90s on early albums like *Music* and *Grassroots*.

"They had this ability to cross-pollinate all these different musical genres in a seamless kind of way," remembers former Capricorn

Records executive Don Schmitzerle, who signed 311 in June 1992. Twenty years and nine albums later, the band plans to start recording again following the spring tour—with or without a label.

"We're free agents now, and so we've got a lot of options on the table," says Hexum. The band satisfied its contract with Volcano Records, their label since 2000, last year. Before the band moved out to L.A. two decades ago, 311's tradition meant Monday night gigs at the Ranch Bowl in Omaha. Now the guys have their own holiday. 311 Day, the band's five-hour display of continuous classic cuts, climaxes with a drum solo performed, in unison, by every member of the group. To watch it is to witness unity at work.

"311 really showed us how to be a band, how to tour, how to make it a business," says Sugar Ray frontman Mark McGrath. "They're really underestimated for what great musicians they are. They're working on another plane."

This year, that plane inevitably leads four of the band's five members to age 40, a time when, as the adage goes, life begins. If all his years of making music hadn't already convinced Hexum of this, the realization hit home six months ago when he and his wife welcomed their first child.

"It's just a very fulfilling thing," he says, "a sense of purpose that you can never really fully understand until you're in it." **BW**



Eric Gilbert isn't sweating the tour diary.

## NOBODY RIDES FOR FREE

Finn Riggins' Eric Gilbert sent a communique to *Boise Weekly* the other day asking/suggesting/encouraging that we make a spot on the bright and shiny boiseweekly.com for tour diaries.

"Tour diaries?" we asked.

"Yes, tour diaries," he replied. "The *Willamette Week* in Portland does this cool thing on their site where they host tour diaries of local bands ... and they stay on the site archived over time ... I was wondering if the *BW* might be interested in doing such a thing? We'd gladly post stuff from time to time on the road to update folks at home with what we're up to out there on the battlefield," added Gilbert.

We loved the idea and told Gilbert to put his thinking/writing cap on. Finn Riggins—who, as we reported a couple of weeks ago, are out conquering the East and West coasts—will be the first travelers to have a tour diary. While the whole setup is not quite ready at this printing, it won't be long before a visit to boiseweekly.com/boise/music will reveal a multitude of multimedia missives from Finn Riggins and other local troubadours as they spread music and love to the rest of the world (or at least Pocatello and Idaho Falls).

Want to participate? The rules for contributing are as simple as the village idiot:

1. You must endeavor to include photos and video.
2. You must be from Boise or the surrounding areas.
3. You must actually be out on tour.

We want you to write about flat tires, missed shows, stolen equipment, drunken hook-ups, cool connections, asshole bar owners, crazy co-eds, couch surfing—we want to read about all of it.

And as for us, we will not rule with an iron fist over this crazy kingdom: The entries will post as written, warts and all. If you are a terrible speller, have a propensity for palaver or can't write yourself out of a paper bag, not our problem. We will not be responsible for your stupidity nor will we take credit for your brilliance. These are your stories in your words.

If you are in a local band and would like to contribute, drop me a note at amy@boiseweekly.com and let me know. Once the diaries are set up and running smoothly, I'll let you know how to get in on it.

—Amy Atkins