

VIBE

NO AGENDA,
NO PROBLEMS

Chad Sexton

BY BOB DOERSCHUK

Next time you see Chad Sexton, be sure to thank him for his service.

Why? Because after nearly 30 years with 311, that's his mission: to repay the loyalty of their fans by servicing them with music they will love.

Now, every performer wants to send audiences home with smiles on their faces. Sadly, that often means catering to commercial expectations. Sexton, though, is talking about something more complex: songs that are conceived,

finessed, and performed respectfully with listeners in mind. And those who are into 311 know that means fusing the best of disparate genres into grooves that don't quite sound like anything you've heard before.

In other words, expectations are high for every new 311 project. But so is the risk of getting too esoteric. Fortunately, Sexton, guitarist/vocalist Nick Hexum, vocalist/turntablist Doug "S.A." Martinez, bassist Aaron "P-Nut" Willis, and guitarist Tim Mahoney figured out how

to make it work—and on their new album *Voyager*, their concept is evident.

"We wanted to balance this record, with creative art and stuff for people who don't know the band yet," Sexton explains. "Most of the of the songs I write are about pushing boundaries and doing things differently. We have other things to balance that out, so it's not just an album of my weird creative music. Balance is the key."

This principle guides Sexton in his work with 311, from composition to coming up with patterns for his and his bandmates' material. "See, songs that are simple and easy to digest are often successful, but they don't last a long time," he says. "They're here and then they're gone. I'll bet you can't recall right now any hits from 2005, but you can recall hits of the '70s and '80s because they often involved intricate chord progressions around some awesome writing. That's not to say it doesn't happen anymore—it does—but generally, if you do something with a groove and some creativity, it lasts longer. People will love it for five years rather than [saying], *Oh, that was last summer's hit.*"

Even with a catalog that dates back to 1990 and now includes 13 albums, Sexton insists that his process hasn't changed much when it comes to finding his place in each song. "It's pretty much the same as on our first record. This whole time, I've wanted to invent beats that people can rock or dance to while musicians can be satisfied by hearing some things they might not have heard before. I understand

that I need to simplify on songs that might gravitate toward the masses. But on our own wacky thing, obviously not for the whole record, I just go for broke."

The first step always involves not overthinking. "When I hear a new song, I try to keep my brain blank," he says. "Over a month or two, different phrases and parts and transitions start coming to me. I'll listen to the demo while going down to the studio. I don't want to hear it too much, just a couple of times. Then I try to clear my head and it comes together. Going in with no agenda has helped me be more creative."

Once he gets past that vacant stage and allows ideas to percolate, Sexton concentrates on the goal he sets for each song he has ever recorded, which involves playing something that fits but is hopefully unlike any drum part ever heard before. Then, passive listening gives way to a conscious, decisive-yet-visceral search for perfection. Inevitably, like miners digging for diamonds, he comes up with a gem.

He points to "Dream State" on *Voyager* as an example. "The song starts with a snare hit right on the first beat. After that, it's straight-up 4/4—no odd time signatures. I build my beat on the central riff of the song. Then, halfway through the second verse, I finally give the people a normal beat. If no one knew where the beat was by that point, well, here's where it is! And then I get back to the original pattern. On some songs I won't even play each verse the same way. I might adjust it just a tiny bit to keep people's attention

without being like, *Hey, look at me!*"

Sexton credits his high school jazz band with fostering his love for coming up with parts. "The drum charts had nothing on them, other than maybe some accents above the bar lines," he notes. "You had to come up with your own stuff. I really enjoyed doing that. I remember thinking, *Too bad this is just jazz band in high school. No one cares.* But then I'd think, *I wonder if I can get a gig just writing drum lines. Is that even a job?*"

Sound is as critical to Sexton as parts. In particular, he's developed kind of a trademark crisp pop to his snare. On *Voyager*, it can be heard at the top of "Crossfire" and in the first verse of "Don't You Worry." This may be due to a recent change in his setup. "I'm using a stainless steel Pearl snare," he says. "It's like 30 lbs. and six or seven inches deep. Even with in-ears, I could tell that my regular snares weren't going into the room. I need to project when I play. So, I tried this thing and, oh my God, it sounded great! It still has the 311 sound but with a little more beat to it. I'm going to take it with me on tour."

He sums up, "All in all, I'm really happy with *Voyager*. I'm really happy with [2017's] *Mosaic*. As far as my drumming goes, those two records are way better than, say, *Stereolithic* in 2014. That one was kind of dry and straightforward, but now I'm taking it up a notch and putting a powerful energy behind my playing. At least in our fan base, that's what seems to make people happy. That's our main goal."

QUICK LICKS Transcription by Andy Ziker

'Don't You Worry'

Chad Sexton is known for the high tuning on his snare, but his musicality is also obvious. Check out the space he leaves in measures two and three, and how he downshifts into a moody chorus starting in measure eight. The following is notated with the snare drum on 3 (instead of the more typical 2 and 4 backbeat). This is to reflect the involved reggae feel where 3 is a major point of emphasis, and to make it easier to digest the rapid-fire (and unique) bass drum hits in measures four, six, and seven.

♩ = 132
0:50

The musical notation is a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It represents a snare drum part. The tempo is marked as 132 beats per minute, and the time signature is 4/4. The notation shows a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing rests. The notation is transcribed by Andy Ziker.