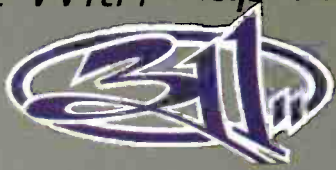


# Trend?

## What Trend!

### Kickin' It With Rap-Rock Pioneers



By Kathleen Richards

**F**orget trends. Though 311 is one of the earliest pioneers of the rap-rock "trend," the reggae-metal-rap-funksters aren't relying on the public's desire for a certain sound or image for the success of their latest release, *From Chaos* and their single "You Wouldn't Believe." Rather, the band says their hopes hinge on their faith in people's ability to recognize and appreciate high-quality musical explorations.

*From Chaos*, their sixth major label release (this time on their new label Volcano) finds 311 in fine form; swaying between deadly on-target riffs, complex rhythmic melodies, and lead singer Nick Hexum's fluent vocals—frequently all in one song.

I talked with Hexum at the beginning of their stint on the Warped Tour to see what's changed for 311 in the past ten years, and where they are right now.

**GAVIN:** I read that you initially wanted the album to have a harder edge, but then you decided not to go that route. Why the change?

**Nick Hexum:** Right. Well, our first goal was to capture the energy of our live shows because people would say "you gotta see 'em live to understand it," and "their live show rocks so hard" compared to our albums. I think on the blue album [*311* (Capricorn) in 1995] we captured a lot of energy, but then we got into such experimental things after that, that we wanted to just have a lot of up-tempos, big guitars, simple songs. And then after we made a solid start doing that, we realized that there's so much metal right now and the things that we can do that set us apart are the har-

monies, the melodies, the classic songwriting.

**Do you feel like you're trying to even out the field a little bit?**

Or actually just to take both extremes to new heights—the hardest rocking we've ever done, as well as the prettiest, mellow songs we've ever done; to take both sides farther because usually one album had taken one side to new extremes and now we're trying to become even more diverse and with a wider range.

**So you were pretty focused with your songwriting then.**

Yeah, I think we were. We really knew what we wanted to do and since we had been trying out new songs on the road, we went straight from the tour to the recording studio with no break whatsoever because that's when our chops and our energy is at its peak.

**You guys definitely have a trademark sound. You hear your songs, you know that's 311. But looking back on your past five—or including the first three indies, eight—albums, do you see a progression there? Do you feel you guys are evolving?**

I do. I mean, the song "You Wouldn't Believe" is maybe the closest thing to a standard 311 song on the album. But I would say 90 percent of the album feels like brand new territory to us. And as people listen to it for a while and digest it, they're gonna realize this is some pretty unique shit I think.

**You worked with the same producer, Ron Saint Germain, that you worked with on 311. What does he bring to the table?**

He wants to work long and hard which is fine with us because we're really driven people. The coolest

thing is that he would start out each day being like, "Man, I can really feel it on this one, we are gonna do some shit that people are just gonna freak" and he's like jumping around the studio. You know, he's smoking weed with us, he's just a fire-cracker. When you compare that to Hugh Padgham who did the prior album—who's a very nice guy, but his background is Phil Collins and Sting and so forth—he's like, English, sipping his tea, and [with British accent] "I quite like that actually." Whereas Saint's like, "Let's fucking go!" Totally different.

**Favorite song on the album?**

Right now I'm really fond of "I Told Myself."

**I like that song too.**

Thank you. It's got kind of a Smiths chorus, which I don't think has ever been done in a rock-rap setting. And then the bridge in the middle is maybe like Jane's Addiction or Black Sabbath with that half time, really long chords, and soaring melody and everything. And then the verse; the rhythms that I'm doing there are kinda reminiscent of like early De La Soul or like Rob Base. When you combine Smiths, Rob Base, and Black Sabbath or Jane's Addiction, it's gotta be some new shit, you know?

Most of the time, we're trying to break a pretty new sound. In the '90s we were trying to get rap-rock on a radio format that was all about grunge. It was probably such a challenge and headache for our label because they've pretty much gotta kick some doors down every time. And you know, when rock-

rap was doing so good, then here comes 311 with our single "Flowing" which was kind of like The Clash or some sort of Brit-pop like Bowie or the Beatles. So we're always kind of one step out of step with radio and stuff like that, so we just wanna apologize to our label for that.

**But you guys have been around a long time and released nine albums. That's a lot. That's not easy.**

Yeah, it is nuts to think about that because these bands that may be hotter than us today, they're still in their first explosion. And we can really only be compared to bands that are on their second or third wave like Chili Peppers...Stone Temple Pilots. It's a different thing. And bands that are hot now, if they have a real attitude of "we're the shit," I'm like, "Well, let's see how you're doing in a few years."

We're just excited that, with the new label and all the energy that's going on, that we can kind of change the momentum, because though we've had a strong touring career and always sold a respectable number of albums, gold or better, with the crazy numbers that are being done, we don't see any reason why we shouldn't... Back in the day we would get bad reviews that would just be like "white boy rap-rock sucks and I don't like it" and that's it. They would just kinda dismiss the whole genre and just move on to the next thing, but now it's like with as many kids as are into this type of stuff, they have to acknowledge that it's a real format. And we'll get our props somehow. ■



Nick Hexum (top left) and 311 rap-rock knights at the roundtable.