

# Electric Blueprints

Nick Hexum of 311

by Jon Chappell

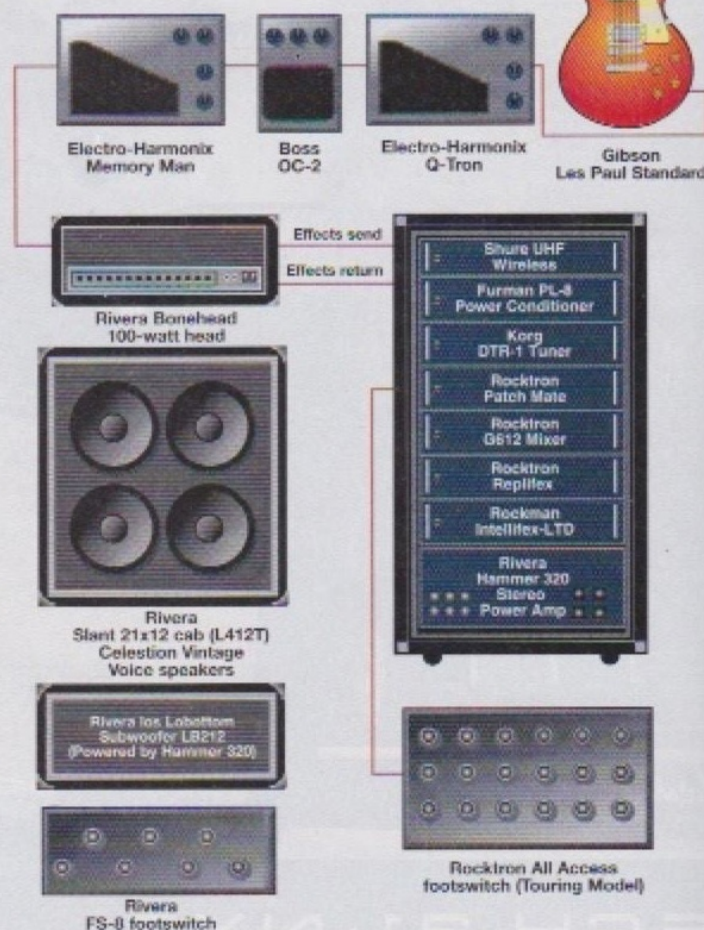
Nick Hexum is the principal songwriter and rhythm guitarist behind the hip-hop/reggae/funk/rock quintet 311. In order to keep his tone clear—so he can better inspire trance-like nods from his listeners—Nick opts for a straightforward yet ingenious setup.

Hexum's sound starts with his tobacco Les Paul Standard solidbody or silver-glitter Les Paul Custom semi-hollowbody. He first sends the guitar signal into an Electro-Harmonix Q-Tron envelope-controlled filter, and then into any other stompboxes that might be inline at the time (such as a Boss OC-2 octaver or Electro-Harmonix Memory Man delay) before going into the input of a Rivera Bonehead amp. The Rivera has an effects loop, which is activated with a foot controller. All of Hexum's digital effects are run through the effects loop path, as they are much more at home between the preamp and the power amp than at the front end. His two favorite digital effects units are the Rocktron Intelliflex and the Rocktron Repliflex. Using this setup enables Hexum to get his grit 'n' grime lo-fi sound via the stompboxes (the Q-Tron, Memory Man, and OC-2), plus the sparkly cleanliness that digital technology has to offer.

However, Hexum is looking to attain a simpler operation while on tour, to more easily access his various sound patches. "Eventually, we want to have all effects be accessed through a switcher," says guitar tech Alex Rivera. "That's what you want for the road—simplicity." But simple doesn't necessarily mean simplistic. By using Rivera Bonehead amps, with their footswitch-activated effects loop, Hexum can selectively dial in all of his effects. Instead of placing his pedal effects directly inline, Hexum will first go to a Rocktron All Access footswitch. "We'll have the stompboxes moved to the loop," says Rivera, "so Nick can use the Boss or the Q-Tron or the Memory Man singly, or in any combination. We'll still use the Rocktron units, but we'll be able to access them in parallel, instead of inline, which is the way we have it now." ■



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Interview by Dale Turner • Photography by Tom Stratton

# ALL SYSTEMS

# GO

**A**t a time when bands are often hell-bent to form, get signed, and have a hit single all in one week, it's getting harder to find an act that's not fabricated for the moment. Meet 311. "Between 1990 and 1997, we were working our asses off," explains guitarist/vocalist Nick Hexum. "After our first album came out in 1993, we were doing nearly 150 shows and recording a new album—every single year."

album, *Transistor*, we wrote 31 songs in three months. As a result, we didn't take the time to enjoy the process of making music. But now, we realize that life's not a race, and we've relaxed a bit. For the new album, we waited for the inspiration, rather than forced it."

*Soundsystem*, the quintet's first studio release in almost three years, depicts all the 311 trademarks—phat, funky grooves, skronking guitars, and the signature tag-team vocals of Nick Hexum and turntable trickster S.A. Martinez. A year and

## 311 blast their mix of hard rock, funk, hip-hop,

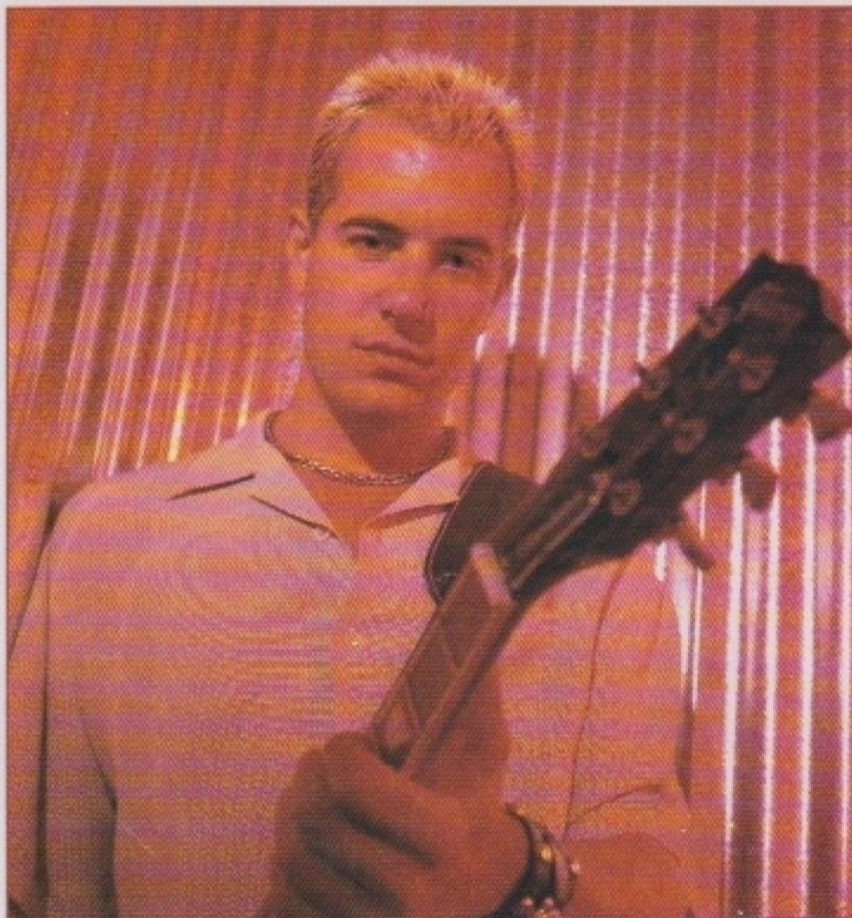
Formed in Omaha, NE, in 1988, 311 have turned the efforts of their relentless touring and recording schedule into enormous success. To date, the band's mix of hard rock, hip-hop, and a host of other sounds has produced record sales in excess of five million copies. But, as Hexum admits, with that level of success also comes pressure and high expectations. "For our last

a half in the making, the album should soon prove that its lengthy cultivation was well worth the wait. Before the band headed out for their first wave of club and theater gigs, *GuitarOne* tracked down Hexum and guitarist Tim Mahoney while they were still holed up at their own Burbank, CA, studio, called "The Hive," to see what the buzz is all about.









had our Jamaican buddy Wayne Jobson come in and say some of our lyrics in his real heavy Jamaican patois, and S.A. used that to scratch on "Come Original." And at the beginning of the song "Evolution," S.A. is scratching on his own voice, from an *a cappella* version of a lyric he says in "Star Shines," which is a song off *Transistor*. A lot of the vocal snippets are also from this crazy friend of ours named Fez, who came in and said a lot of funny things on a mic. That's him at the beginning of "Freeze Time," where there's a guy saying, "Are you all ready for 311?"

**Was there any particular reason you guys released a live album [*Live*, released 1996] and re-released some of your pre-Capricorn material [*Omaha Sessions*] before going into the studio to work on *SoundSystem*?**

**Nick:** People had been bugging us for both of those things for a long time, so we felt it was overdue. We had a bunch of live tapes from touring, so we went through 'em, picked out the best ones, and mixed 'em down. We also found out that shitty bootlegs of our early recordings were going around for fifty bucks a piece, so we felt like the fans were getting ripped off a little bit. We decided that if they really wanted the old stuff that bad, we should just put it out on our own label and sell it through our web site [[www.311music.com](http://www.311music.com)]. It's basically for the really hardcore fans who wanna get every bit of 311 that there is. So

**"There's nothing really 'controversial' in our personal lives to why we're not on *E!* or *Entertainment Tonight*. For us, it's not roll lifestyle; we're a band about the music." —Nick Hexum**

**Before I even attempt to impose any musical labels or categories upon you guys, how would you describe 311's sound?**

**Nick Hexum:** I think our sound is a blend of rock, hip-hop, reggae, funk, and punk, with some jazz and Latin in there, too. We're just a big hybrid of all the styles that we listen to, so it takes a lot of words to describe us.

**You've achieved major-league success while still operating outside of the mainstream. What's the secret?**

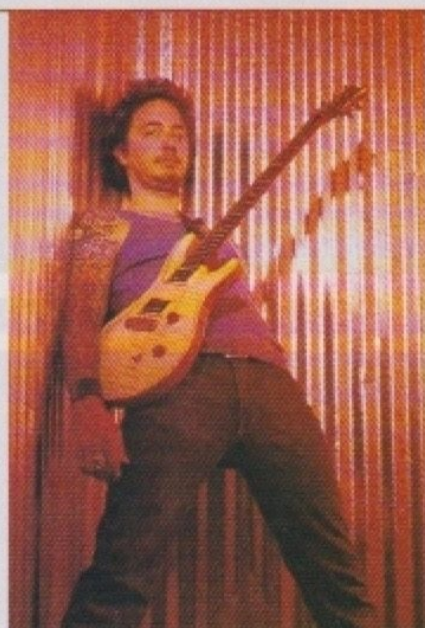
**Tim Mahoney:** There's no secret; we just worked hard. We finally got a record out there in stores [*Music*, released 1993], then we went on tour and just started playing. There were times when we were playing for nothing more than a couple people shooting pool in a bar, but we just kept playing and kept working. Then, by the time "Down," the third single from 311, came out, it just seemed like a natural course of events for us to finally get some more mainstream acceptance on radio and MTV. I guess it just built up to the point where we couldn't be denied. If you're creating good

music and you stick with it, even if your band is kind of different or doesn't fit in, it's just a matter of time before you see big things start to happen.

**Nick:** Basically, we sold a lot of records without being mainstream by doing a ton of touring. And we've always placed the music above the antics of the band. There's nothing really "controversial" in our personal lives to talk about. That's why we're not on *E!* or *Entertainment Tonight*. For us, it's not about the rock 'n' roll lifestyle; we're a band about the music.

**311 is the first hard rock-based band that I remember hearing that had a turntable in its lineup.**

**Nick:** Yeah. That's something that's been kind of coming up slowly. At first we didn't have a turntable, and then S.A. got into it and did a little scratching on *Grassroots* [released 1994]. It's since become more and more prevalent in the music. And on *SoundSystem*, we kind of took it to a new level. We made our own vinyl record for scratching. By taking sounds and little vocal snippets, we made it more personalized. We





we remixed a few of those old songs, then remastered everything from that period and called it the *Omaha Sessions*.

**Were you guys writing material for *Soundsystem* at that time?**

**Tim:** Yeah. I think everyone writes music all the time—especially Nick. He can tell you about his traveling rig.

**Nick:** It's gonna be greatly expanded on this next tour, but on the last tour, I had a rack of sound modules, which includes my Akai S3000 sampler and a Steinberg Recycle that I use to make dope-assed drum loops. Then I have a couple Roland sound modules, which are basically synth sound modules, and I have a little MIDI controller on my guitar so I can play the stuff directly into my Macintosh, through Opcode Studio Vision software. I really like to get my ideas down as quickly as possible. With this setup on the road, I can write new songs or remix pretty much anything in a hotel room. You've got a lot of time to kill on the road, and between shows it can be boring, so it's nice to have something constructive to do rather than just sit around and smoke weed all day—though we do that, too [laughs].

**Tim:** If you get an idea, you just gotta be able to record it any time because it'll come to you whenever. So I think songwriting is always going on. But as far as the band getting together and "working" on the songs, it didn't really happen until after we finished putting together *Omaha Sessions* and the *Live* record.

**Nick:** Also, everyone bought these hard-drive recorders—Roland VS-1680s—so everyone had

have to worry every day about, "Oh my God! This is costing us \$1,500–\$2,000 a day to be in here!" There weren't any of those kinds of stresses. It allowed us to work comfortably, at our own pace. This is "our place" and no one else is in here working; it's just us.

**Nick:** And we can get as wacky as we want, smoke as much weed as we want, and not be watching the clock, because it's not \$2,000 a day. When you do the math, a regular studio is about two grand a day, so we're saving \$60,000 a month. Here we're paying about \$8,000 a month in rent, and we spent the rest of our money buying all the gear. I think a lot more bands are gonna go that way. But for me, the big benefit of doing it that way was the fact that when you go into a big studio, you usually don't know how to run all the gear because it's just a big mass of knobs. When we built this studio, we learned how to operate all the gear our-

selves. This time we really got to work "hands on" with the compressors and EQs and mic placement without feeling rushed. We really learned a lot that'll help us out down the road, as far as our producing and engineering skills.

**Tim:** It's just like working at home. Nick can operate everything by himself—he could go in there and do a vocal take by himself.

**Nick:** I don't have to schedule it with anybody—just come in, set it up myself. It's cool.

**How do 311 songs typically come together? Do they originate with a guitar riff or a groove?**

**Nick:** Both. Occasionally, I'll come up with a chorus concept first, and then write around that. But most of the time, we come up with a guitar riff, and then we build upon that, adding the vocals later. For one or two songs on this record, our drummer Chad [Sexton] wanted to

## Talk about. That's about the rock 'n'

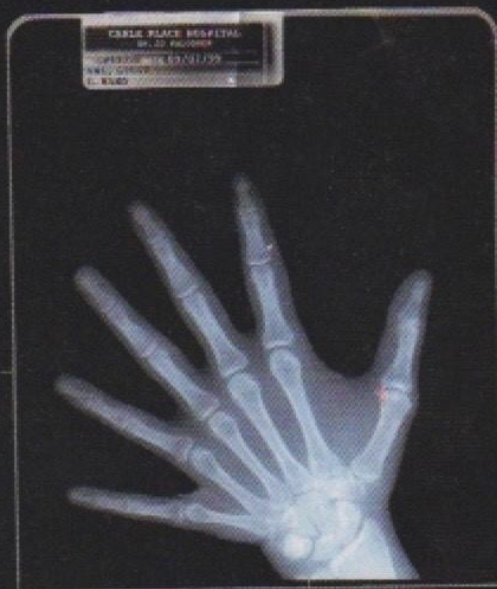
been making little demos at home, working on their own while we were finishing up those other things. For this album, we basically brought those demos in and then dumped 'em into the Pro Tools system so that we could build upon those ideas.

After that, we got together and started to teach each other the songs and began rehearsing. But the cool thing about this album is, since we had so long to do it, we kind of waited until we felt inspired to put something down on tape. It wasn't a matter of sticking to deadlines and stuff like that. On *Transistor*, we did 31 songs in three months, whereas on this record, we did 13 songs in a year and a half. So we took our time.

**How important to 311's creative process was recording *Soundsystem* here at your self-operated studio, the Hive?**

**Tim:** It was awesome. A big, commercial studio can be pretty expensive on a day-to-day basis. But we own all of the equipment here at the Hive—we invested in our future—so we didn't

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start them with a beat, or a feel first, totally regardless of the music, and base a song around that, like he did with "Evolution."

**Tim:** There are also songs that individuals write. For example, Nick wrote all the music to "Come Original." And "Life's Not a Race" was a collaboration; we each wrote different parts of the music.

**Nick:** Before we start writing, we'll talk about concepts for the song. We'll say, "Okay. Let's have a song that has a tempo of 100 bpm," and then talk about whether we want it to be a shuffle-like hip-hop feel, or more straight-ahead, driving rock. Or another concept is on the song "Beautiful Disaster" from *Transistor*, where Tim and I are playing harmonized guitar leads. We also do that on three or four songs on this new album. It's something that's not really done very much in popular music today; it was done quite a bit back in the '70s and '80s.

**Tim:** Iron Maiden, man! I just saw Iron Maiden, and they had three guitar players who were doing that in every song. It was awesome!

**Nick:** We do stuff like that, but the arrangements and note choices are more like horn parts than a "metal" song.

**That harmonized melodic guitar figure in the intro and after the chorus in "Strong All Along" sounds similar to what a horn section would play.**

**Nick:** Yeah. That's a perfect example. It's like listening to Bob Marley, where they'd always

have a real cool, simple, root/3rd horn arrangement. We thought it would be cool on guitar, because we don't have any horns. So, we kind of brought harmonized guitar parts back into the '90s a little bit.

**How do you go about structuring your guitar harmonies?**

**Nick:** Generally, because Tim practices more, I have him play the higher part because it stands out a little bit more. Sometimes I'll come up with a riff, and then, just through his ear, Tim will figure out what the higher harmony should sound like.

**Tim:** Like the bridge in "Come Original," that took a couple times of playing through it to really figure out some of those notes. It's pretty cool, though.

**Are you playing that "Hawaiian-sounding" guitar break in the outro of "Come Original"?**

**Tim:** Yeah [laughs], "Hawaiian Chorus!"

**Nick:** We gotta give a shout out to Rocktron on that one. They gave us some gear years ago and we found this patch called "Hawaiian Chorus." It makes the guitar sound almost like a slide guitar, the way it subtly detunes and has this nice long reverb. Actually, we used that effect quite a bit on *Transistor*, too; it's very atmospheric.

**"Flowing" has a saturated, harmonic-laden**

**guitar tone similar to "Down" [from 311].**

**How do you dial in a dirty tone that's equal parts "beef" and "screechy overtones?"**

**Tim:** It was just fine-tuning this time. That's one of the things that was good about having Hugh [Padgham] produce the album. He was willing to take the extra time to get the best possible sound. I used a MESA/Boogie TremoVerb Combo for most of the recording, and some of the knobs, especially the presence, are really touchy. You barely move it and you hear a big difference. So we just spent a lot of time tweaking every knob, and then when we got it just right, Hugh would go into the "live" room and move the mic around a little bit.

**I've always loved how you guys take the natural "finger squeaks" that occur when your fret-hand moves along a string, and incorporate that sound into a riff.**

**Tim:** Yeah. We do that in "Large in a Margin" and "Freeze Time." I guess it's the nature of how we play riffs like that. In "Freeze Time," that's just the way we groove on it. Your whole body works when you're playing the guitar, and your hands bring out these extra sounds. It's rad!

**Nick:** If you're grooving right along in 16th notes, almost anything can add a percussive sound to it, even harmonics. So we never say, "Let's keep it clean!" We're more likely to say, "Let's keep it raw like a fuckin' garage band!" We just let all the slides, errant harmonics, transients, and so forth come out. Hugh always

*Continued on page 158*



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## Les Paul

Continued from page 80

Then I get home and listen to the tape and say, "Uh oh, I went over the border." So sometimes maybe having the handicap is not all bad news.

### Does it make you think of your old friend Django Reinhardt?

[Laughs] Yeah. We all have handicaps, but that's what life is all about. When I think of him now, I think of him like I always did. He was the fellow who paved the way and accomplished all the things we wanted to do by coming along and just shocking the world. I remember him saying to me in 1946, "Les, when I came to America, I failed. I don't play that badly, do I?" He could never quite understand why he was never accepted over here. I met him many times in Cincinnati, Chicago, and other places when he was on tour with Duke Ellington. Although he played great, he was like a fish out of water with Ellington's band. They were jazz players per se, and Django had a different background. When I first heard Django here, I too was disappointed, because he had to have his type of rhythm behind him. And, when he went to play bebop, it was even worse.

### How did he sound on the electric guitar?

The electric guitar just fought him terri-

bly, and he tried everything to beat that. I discussed it many times with Django, and told him that he should just do his thing. That's what he was known for, and that's where he shined. As soon as you go electric—and this goes for a lot of people—the electric gets away from you. However, if you were born with the electric guitar, like Charlie Christian or Jimi Hendrix, it's another story. I have been an electric player for 99% of my life, and this is the way I play. I work with it, not against it.

### Speaking of Hendrix, I believe you have a story about seeing him before he was famous.

I was going into New York in 1962 with some tapes of Simon and Garfunkel that I had to return to Columbia. As I was going down Route 46 in New Jersey that afternoon, I asked my son to pull over so I could see what was going on that night at the Allegro club. We went in, and there was a fellow on stage auditioning, playing this left-handed guitar and beating the hell out of everything all by himself. I said, "I can't stick around, but I'll be back tonight."

I dropped the tapes off in New York and came back that night. When I asked the bartender where the guitar player who had been there in the afternoon was, he said, "We threw him out, he was too loud." So I

went around to all the clubs looking for this fellow playing a black Les Paul, a Black Beauty, but I didn't even know his name. About a year later, my manager said to me, "You know that guy you were looking for? Well, he died in a fire, smoking a cigarette." I thought, "Well, that's that."

Then a few years later, when I was making an album for London Records, I said, "Find me something that's going on today." So they showed me all these albums from Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, and so forth. I laid all the albums out on the floor, and on one of the covers I saw the guy from the Allegro club. The name on the album was Jimi Hendrix. I called a producer for London Records and said, "Who is this guy, Jimi Hendrix? Is he dead?" He said that he was not dead and that he was a big hit in England.

### Did you ever get to meet him?

No, not in person. When he was building Electric Lady Studios in New York, he started calling me on the phone, and we became great friends that way. He would ask me questions about mixing and recording. But we never met in person.

### That was a loss for you and him.

A loss for me, that's for sure. He was a fantastic guitar player. ☐

## 311

stuff that's already been done.

In "Come Original," we also give some shoutouts to people who we feel are forging into the future. You'll notice the lyrics say, "No FX," because I think they're the best hardcore band out there. They really keep pushing the genre of punk. Other artists are also mentioned in the lyrics. Roni Size, from England, is the king of drum 'n' bass now. L.A.-based Black Eyed Peas are my favorite hip-hop group. We also give props to Mr. Vegas, who's a reggae artist we got turned on to while we were in Jamaica a couple of months ago. I just wanted to give a shout out to someone in each genre of music that excites us, so I picked one punk band, one drum 'n' bass band, one hip-hop band, and one reggae/dancehall band.

### The lyrics in your songs always have a positive message. You don't just write about "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" or "gloom and doom" subject matter.

**Tim:** Yeah. Ever since we started playing music, "positivity" has been the underlying energy flow. If you try to maintain a positive lifestyle, it makes life a lot more fun. And when you're more positive, you'll tend to be happier and healthier. It just translates into being a better human being, which can lead to a better human population on earth.

**Nick:** I think that rock 'n' roll is a good way to express anger, but it's kind of over-represented

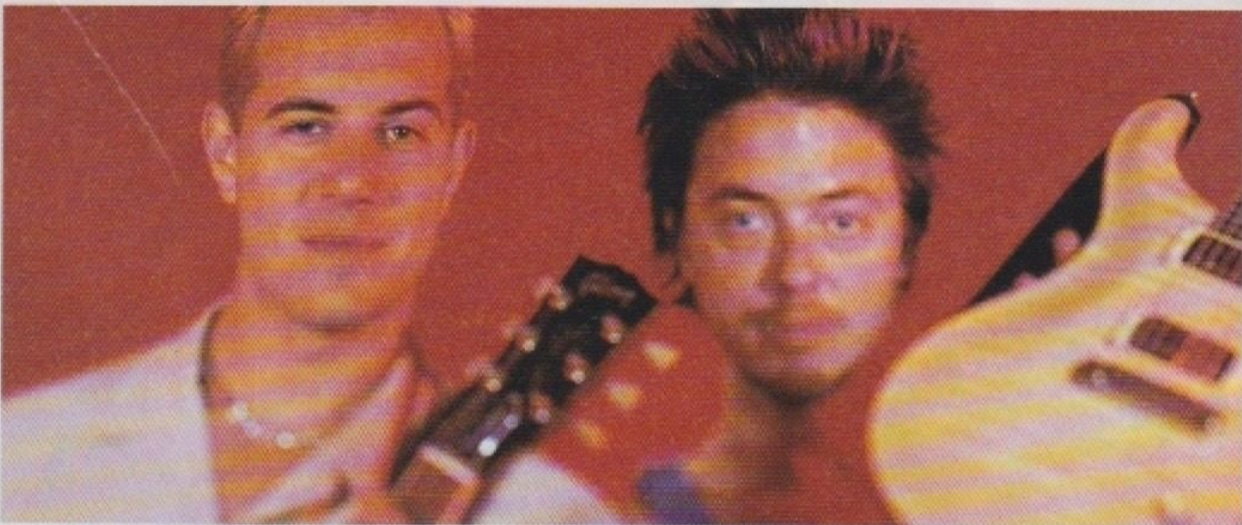
in today's popular culture. It's pretty much "the norm" to be angry, just like in the '60s it was the norm to be about love, tolerance, and positive things. I'm looking at our tour as sort of a mission to offset all the negativity and bad vibes in music today, as well as all the bad news and things that are happening in our society. But I really do like to listen to a lot of those bands that are really pissed off—I get off on the energy. We have a really, really high-energy live show, but it's more of a celebration than an expression of anger. It's not a calculated thing. It just happens that we're positive guys, I guess. And if we go down in history as being a little bit "sappier" or happier than most of the bands in our era, I'd rather have that reputation than one that inspired negativity. We get fan mail, mostly from kids, that says, "I listen to your music when I'm depressed and it cheers me up," or, "I was going through a really hard time in my life—I was really depressed and suicidal. I listened to 311 every day and it got me through some hard times." I really can't see Marilyn Manson getting the same letters—y'know what I'm saying [laughs]?

**Back in 1993, when you guys were still paying your dues, I read a great quote from S.A. Martinez where he said, "Life's a bitch, and then you live." Are you guys "living" now?**

**Tim:** Yeah. We have a good friend, B. Love, who always says, "Rock and live." And that's what we do. We just enjoy rockin' and livin'. That's what the title of our new song "Livin' and Rockin'" is kind of derived from. We're here to live and enjoy life. And having a positive mental attitude can help you navigate your way through life—all of your experiences, whatever they may be.

**Nick:** A cornerstone of our philosophy is: Get as much out of life while you're here, because it's just a quick blast of energy and then you're gone. So you might as well get as many experiences in as you can. And that's what, philosophically, is touched on in the lyrics quite a bit on this album. In the song "Freeze Time," I say, "Try to freeze time; freeze time for your mind; a perfect snapshot to always rewind." In those moments when you're surrounded by your buddies and everything's hitting—you got good music on, you got a buzz on, or whatever—you've got to think, "Hey! This is a good moment in my life!" You have to notice when you're happy, otherwise life just passes by. Now we're realizing, "Hey! This is our prime. This is what we've always wanted!" It's important to take notice when you're in those temporary moments of bliss, because they're always temporary. You can't expect to be happy all the time, you're just going through the peaks and valleys. ☐





said, "We're not Steely Dan here! Let's make it 'warts and all!'"

**Speaking of Steely Dan, those are some pretty progressive-sounding chord changes in the chorus to "Large in the Margin." While the bass guitar is playing a pedal point, you guys play different chords over the top.**

**Nick:** Right. That's one of Chad's creations. He

**Nick:** For people who don't know what a T-wah, envelope filter, or dynamic filter is, basically the harder you play, the more the wah opens. It's been something we've been into for a really long time because it's a really funky sound. On the intro to "Plain," from our first album, it sounds like we're using a wah, but we're not. That was done with a T-wah, so we didn't have to manipulate a pedal or anything. It automatically puts a "wah" on every note.

live show, I try to really focus on singing. That alone is hard enough (*laughs*)!

For people who want to tell the difference between my guitar tone and Tim's, I'm playing the first four measures of "Freeze Time." But when the band kicks in, Tim takes over. I use a Rivera stack, the Bonehead, which I really, really love a lot. It has a subwoofer with a separate amp and two 12" speakers on the bottom that just handle the really low shit. And then there's

**"Ever since we started playing music, 'positivity' has been the underlying energy flow." —Tim Mahoney**

just thought it would be cool to keep the same bass note throughout but have the chords change over it, and the vocals changing with the chords. It creates some tension and release.

**Does Chad play guitar, too?**

**Nick:** Yeah. He's got this special, weird "two-finger" style (*laughs*).

**Tim:** When Nick and I play downtuned stuff, we use thicker strings, but Chad takes his SG and tunes it down two and a half steps, so his super-thin strings are flopping all over the place. His style is funny, but it rocks. He gets some great sounds.

**Are you guys tuned down to B on "Mindspin"?**

**Tim:** Yeah, on "Mindspin" and "Eons." I took my Paul Reed Smith with beefier strings on it and tuned down to B. I tuned it like a regular six-string, but two and a half steps lower. Now, I'm playing those songs on Ibanez and Schecter seven-strings, so it's a little bit different, but I've gotten used to it.

**In the bridge to "Life's Not a Race" there's a guitar tone that, to me, sounds exactly like that weird sound that represents all the adult voices in the Charlie Brown cartoons.**

**Tim:** That's a T-wah, or dynamic filter, as it's called now by Boss. But it's a "touch wah," or an envelope filter-style sound.

**The leadwork in "Life's Not a Race" almost sounds like a cross between Carlos Santana and John Scofield.**

**Tim:** Awesome!

**Nick:** That's pretty accurate, because Tim listens to that stuff.

**Tim:** Yeah. Someday maybe I'll get to catch up with them, but it's like they're running marathons while I'm still learning to walk (*laughs*). But those two guys right there are definitely two of the people I listen to the most. We saw Scofield a couple of times in the past year and he is totally sick, in the best way.

**Plus you've got your Paul Reed Smith, Santana's signature axe.**

**Tim:** Yeah. I used a Paul Reed Smith archtop on a lot of the songs. I also used a hollowbody Paul Reed Smith on the album.

**Nick, what guitars did you use on this record?**

**Nick:** I can't remember if I used my Gibson ES-135 on this record ... I don't think so. I usually just play my tobacco-burst Les Paul. The only times I end up playing are songs where Tim and I have separate parts. On the songs that are just straight-ahead rock songs, Tim's the only one on guitar. But whenever there are harmonized leads or two guitar parts, it's necessary for me to play. Live, I play the same amount; only when necessary. I love the guitar, but for the

a Marshall-style 4x12 cabinet that handles the regular stuff. So for the really chunky shit, the subwoofer in my Rivera Bonehead really makes it heavy; it just shakes the room.

**Tim:** You can totally hear the sub in there at the beginning of that song. Steve Lukather, from Toto, designed that amp.

**What are some of the effects that you guys feel are at the core of 311's sound?**

**Nick:** A lot of times, to beef up single-note riffs, we'll put those parts through an octave pedal, which has kind of been a staple of our sound for about 10 years now. I guess the octaver and the T-wah are sort of our "signature" effects.

**A lyric in "Come Original" describes 311's sound right on the money: "Funk/slap bass mixed with dancehall and hip-hop beats and funk guitar."**

**Nick:** Yeah. I guess that's the point of the song "Come Original." If you're not doing something that's slightly original, then you suck, basically. So I'm kind of pointing out why we're original, because we're combining these disparate styles that aren't normally done together—funk guitar, punk guitar, hip-hop beats, reggae, rapping, funk/slap bass. It's kind of a genre we've created on our own. There are tons of original bands out there, but there are also a lot of "rehash" bands that are attempting to re-create