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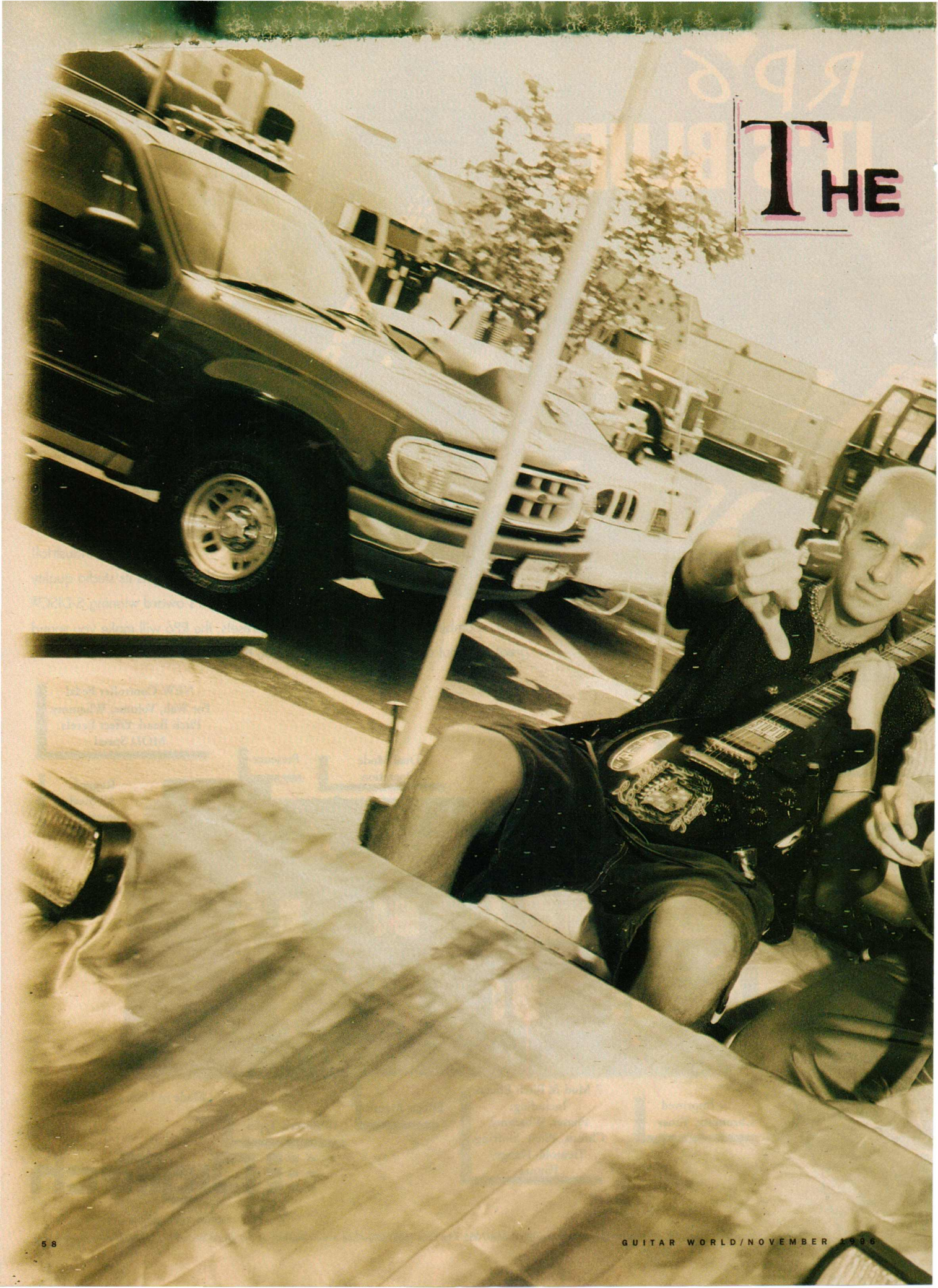
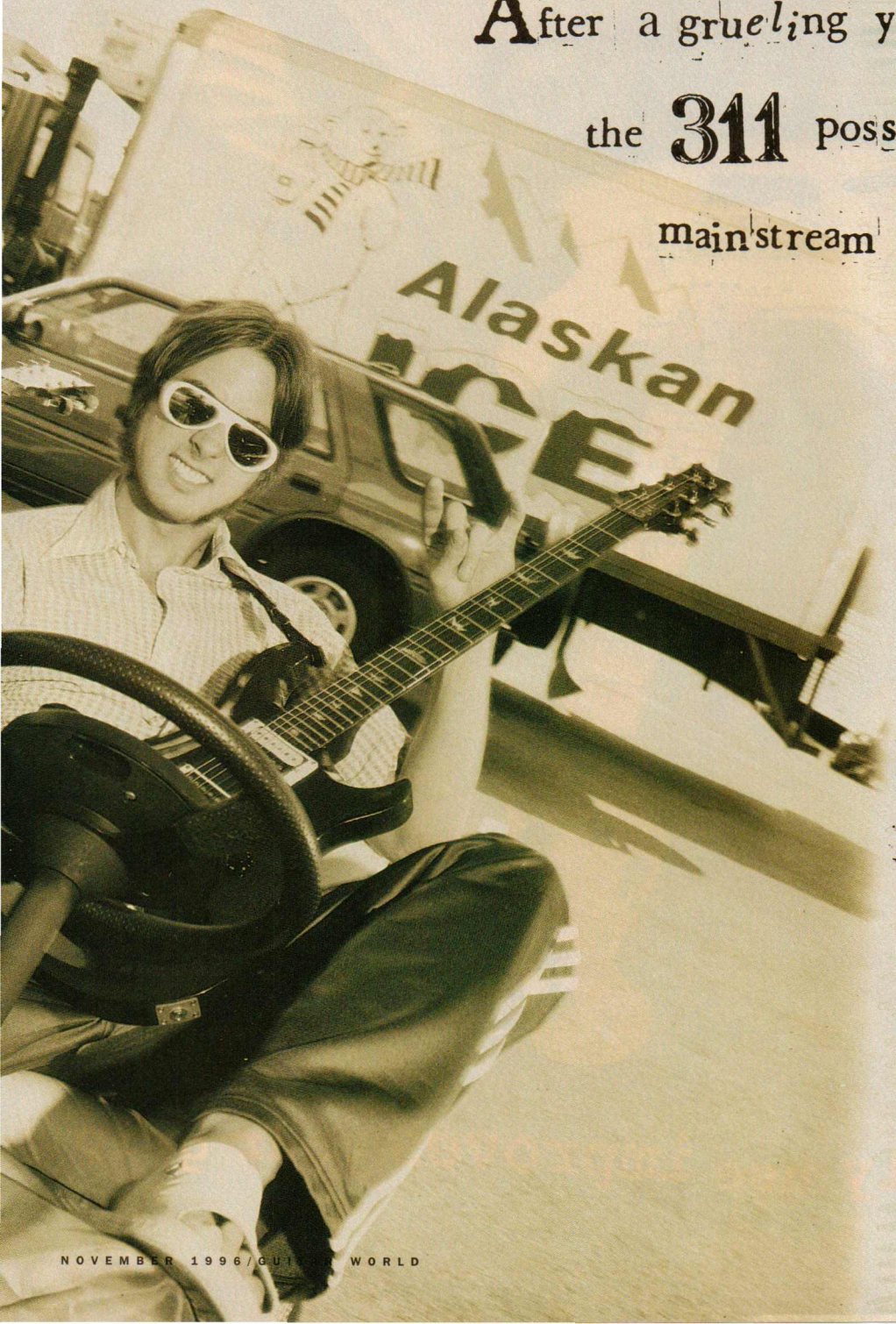


Harder They Come.

After a grueling year on the road, the 311 posse slams into the mainstream with its kinetic fusion of rap and rock.



Words: by J. D. Considine
Photos: Rafael Fuchs

AT FIRST GLANCE, the H.O.R.D.E. Festival's Washington, D.C., stop (which was actually deep in the Virginia suburbs) looked like any other hippie jam-band gathering. There were tie-dyes, craft booths, mellow vibes and enough casually underdressed college kids to make anyone over 35 feel appallingly parental.

If these were Jerry's Kids, though, you wouldn't have known it from the roar that went up when 311 hit the stage. From the rap-goes-metal sting of "Hive" to the slinky slow groove of "Nix Hex" to the driving, dancehall-inflected pulse of "All Mixed Up," 311 was definitely drawing on a different musical vocabulary from the other bands on the bill. And

"If everybody loves your band right off the bat, there is something wrong. You're not breaking the mold. You're just being easily digestible"
-Nicholas Hexum

Nicholas Hexum (left) and Timothy J. Mahoney

RAFAEL FUCHS

when the band dove into "Down," the crunchy, sing-song single that has made the band an MTV staple, the mosh pit action was anything but mellow.

It may not be the sort of scene you'd expect at a H.O.R.D.E. show, but then 311 has gotten pretty good at doing the unexpected. More than a year after its initial release, the band's self-titled third album is a bona fide hit, and few people are as amazed at its success as the band members themselves.

"I guess I'm kind of surprised that we're getting as much play as we are," says singer/guitarist Nicholas Hexum, 311's principle songwriter. "Alternative radio used to say that we were too rap or too funky, and R&B/rap radio said we were too rock. It's like we were sitting right in-between many formats. But that's something that we've always known that we're up against."

That's not to say 311 didn't have hopes. When the Omaha quintet—which, in addition to Hexum, includes guitarist Timothy J. Mahoney, bassist P-Nut, drummer Chad Sexton and rapper SA—released its first album, *Music* (Capricorn), in 1993, it had every expectation of being the next big thing. "We've always had really high aspirations, and wanted to be really big," says Hexum. "We were really hoping that MTV would play our video, radio would embrace us, and Rolling Stone and Spin and everyone would write about us.

"But it just didn't happen."

So as the band prepared its second album, *Grassroots* (Capricorn), it rethought its strategy, deciding to forego radio and video and focus on its live show. "We decided to just focus on the aspects of our career that we could actually control," says Hexum. "Just do it through touring, one fan at a time."

It may not be the fastest way to the top, but as its H.O.R.D.E. performance made plain, 311 has learned how to make almost any listener get "Down."

GUITAR WORLD: Now that the band is so successful, you have to deal with issues like marketing and exposure. Is this the sort of stuff you ever imagined you'd be thinking about?

NICHOLAS HEXUM: It's more humble to say, "I never thought all this was going to happen," but we did. My life's goal was to get songs on the radio and be a popular singer. And I think it's finally becoming cool again to get big. Because back in the Sixties, it was cool to be huge.

GW: In the Seventies, that's all anyone wanted.

HEXUM: Right. Then there was this big anti-rock star thing, and now we're just having fun with it. Lately the joke has been, "Quit fronting on alternative. Let's just embrace rock clichés." So we've been putting the devil sign in the air, and saying, "Hey, we're a rock and roll band."

We're going to go out and have fun, and not pretend that we're holier than thou.

GW: Okay, so you always thought you'd break big. Did you expect it would take this long?

HEXUM: I don't know. I guess there was a big reality check after our first album, when we realized, "Hey, wait a minute. Why would we

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play live first, and then you have to learn how to translate it to record. But hip-hop starts out sounding good, then they have to learn how to kick it live.

It's two totally different things. Hip-hop starts out with samples, sounding great on record from the top, but they don't know how to rock a crowd. Whereas a garage band is all about getting the energy and the emotion of the live moment.

GW: Is that why there's more of a dancehall feel on songs like "Down"? Because, unlike a lot of rap, dancehall is very much a live deal.

HEXUM: It is. And lately, I've been listening to less hip-hop than before, just because I'm getting more into the roots of music—the melodies that last forever. And that's one thing that dancehall has. It's basically like rapping with a melody. It can be really fast, like rapping, but it has a melody all the time.

I've noticed when I hear our live tapes that after I've been singing a song for a couple years, where I started out with a rap that didn't have notes, I'll start singing a melody. It just evolves into more of a singing part as it goes along, because when you're rapping, and saying a bunch of things in a row, it's going to gravitate to a particular pitch. If you have an ear, it's going to start itching.

TIMOTHY MAHONEY: I definitely notice that. Over the years, how it's changed.

HEXUM: I'll start sing-songing it more deliberately, because that makes it more listenable.

GW: Tim, do you adjust your guitar part to accommodate the new melody?

MAHONEY: Most of the time, we have the music first, so the melody just seems like a natural thing. It seems like one, churning ensemble playing, and it just flows. It just makes total sense. There's never any kind of conflict or anything.

HEXUM: Yeah, it's like we get into a tribal thing where everyone's just grooving into the beat, and it feels good just to do your part. Some bands are, like, "Well, if I play the same thing twice, two nights in a row, it'll just get boring." But for us, getting into total sync is wonderful. It doesn't have to be about improvising every night; just to be in the groove and playing the parts right is release enough.

MAHONEY: It's sort of like a rock orchestra. Everyone playing their part. One thing that we do a lot is begin with the bass and the guitar playing the same riffs together, and then they move away from each other. It's more orchestral.

GW: The guitar sound on this album is so raw and up front that you must have to play cleaner. That makes me wonder how much of that was part of the concept behind the music, and how much was just a function of the production.

MAHONEY: With this record, there are not that many guitar effects. Like for me, it was just guitar, guitar and octaver. Just straight-up, rockin', in-your-face kinds of tones.

HEXUM: Yeah, the difference you'll find between my style and Tim's is that he's found this perfect tone and sticks to it, and explores through the playing and the melodies. But when I'm playing, I can't really touch his level of technique, so I'll just use a lot of effects, and add noises and textures and different shit like that. So it kind of works out.

MAHONEY: It's complementary.

GW: Is there a perceptible sonic difference between Tim's Paul Reed Smith and Nick's Les Paul?

MAHONEY: I don't know. Definitely, the guitars sound a little different.

HEXUM: PRS is the best guitar that there is. I just can't afford one. [*Laughs*]

I don't give a shit about my sound, I think. Tim goes for that ultimate tone, and I couldn't even get close to that. So I put stickers all over my guitar and make noise with it. That probably just reflects our personalities.

But the PRS is such a beautiful-sounding guitar. And he's got his rig just exactly how

he wants it. He spends hours setting it up, whereas I'll turn my amp on, and, "Eh, sounds good."

GW: So you're playing with sound, and Tim is playing with harmony and notes?

MAHONEY: Yeah. But I want to get back more into the effects and get more explorative on the next record, as far as tone goes.

HEXUM: Yeah, we're going to get into some psychedelic, trippy, dub production, and bring in different space noises and shit like that. Because from *Music* to *Grass Roots* to the blue album, *311*, the sound just got more and more sparse. The first album had samples, percussion—all kinds of shit. And then there was a medium amount of that on *Grass Roots*. And at this point, there's very little percussion and samples and that subsonic bass sound.

I think that now we've gone all the way raw, we're probably going to revert back to some ear candy, and just make psychedelic shit. Because some of the greatest albums were so studio-oriented, like Pink Floyd or someone like that. So that's something you're probably going to see on our next album.

GW: It's true that a lot of the great progressive albums were like that, but also, if you listen to a lot of club stuff now, it's really heavy on ear candy. Like Chemical Brothers...

HEXUM: I love 'em.

GW: A killer record—it's got hooks, it's got melodies—but it's got so much sound treatment. Even the last U2 album was like that.

HEXUM: Another one of my favorite albums. Both of the last two U2 albums. They took such a jump forward on *Achtung, Baby [Island, 1991]*. I was, like, "Oh, my god, they found the groove." Using hip-hop beats and the production... Those are fantastic albums, and I want to get more into that.

Since it's been so long since the last album, I think you're going to see a bigger difference in this next one, and I personally have been listening to Tricky and Chemical Brothers, and all kinds of trip hop.

MAHONEY: And you've got a lot of songs.

HEXUM: Yeah. I've got a whole tape of shit I just put together with my computer, just kind of by myself. Twelve songs that are only going to get better when we add everyone else playing on them. So there's going to be ear candy galore.

GW: It seems to me that we're heading into a time when people will accept that dance music can be rock music. But for a long time, it seemed as if the two had to be kept in separate rooms. So I wonder, is this why you think your sound is changing?

HEXUM: It would be wonderful if we could groove so hard that we started getting played on R&B and hip-hop radio, you

know what I mean? We're always striving to groove, and now I think we're going to get more funky, more acid-jazzy on this next record. But there will still also be a heaviness.

But that's something to strive for. Everyone's moshing to us, and it's obviously high-energy, but if we could groove to such an extreme that it also could go over at a dance club, that would be the bomb.

Yeah. There's going to be some stuff on the next album that might kind of be like guitar-based acid jazz. You know what I mean? Because it's going to have funky drums and bass, but with a strong guitar presence. And we also have some stuff in the works with chording guitar riffs—guitar leads with chording, like you hear all over Boston records and shit. That shit's fun.

MAHONEY: I think the challenge is more for Nick to be able to sing over some of the music—whether he raps or sings or what. Because a lot of people will ask, "Is it hard to play guitar in a band where there's guys that are rapping and stuff like that?" And it's not at all hard. I think it's more the other way around. I think it's a lot harder to rap and to sing the melodies over the musical parts.

HEXUM: I can sing and play guitar, but rap and play guitar? It don't work [*laughs*]. You know what I mean?

MAHONEY: That would be really hard.

GW: I understand what you're saying about the way the instrumental parts fit together, though, because it's kind of like being in a drum troupe.

MAHONEY: [*Looks over at Chad Sexton and smiles*] Drum corps.

HEXUM: What we're doing is a continuum of the most basic form of communication, going all the way back to, like, an African drum circle, where a few people banged on drums and the other people danced. That is what has been going on for thousands and thousands of years, and we're just one tiny piece of the timeline.

That's why our whole band focuses on doing that, because that's what music really is about. The fact that it is connecting to people through radio and stuff—that's cool, but that's not really what we're about. We're really about the immediacy of the live show.

GW: To get back to the drum circle thing, though, what has always made Brazilian or Afro-Cuban or Afro-Caribbean music so exciting is that even though each of the drummers has a specific part—a set role in keeping the beat—there's always a sense of spontaneity that makes the music feel different each time. And I get a very similar sense about the way you guys play.

MAHONEY: Yeah, I totally agree. I mean, like tonight compared to last night, there are definite differences. A lot of things depend on how well we play, whether it's the stage sound or whatever. The vibes.

But yeah, the parts. Some of the songs we've been playing for four or five years, and I love playing 'em every night. It's just the funnest music there is for me to play, and so I just try and work on playing it better and better, you know? Because in every single measure of the song, there's something in it that can be improved for me.

GW: Is it tone control? Time?

MAHONEY: A little bit of both. The tone control, from night to night, usually stays the same. But just execution, and not rushing or slowing down...

HEXUM: The groove. And the energy level. You can have a band that sounds the same, but there can be a totally variable level of energy that will make it that much more fun, or not. You know what I mean? We could go out there and play our songs just at the right tempos but be totally boring, because we're just not putting out that much energy. I don't know how it gets through, whether it's visually or you can hear it in the cadences of the sounds and the

playing, but it's such a big difference.

That's what we've been going for, for so long. Just to save up our energy, and then get out there and let it out. Because it's all about spending that electricity you've got stored up. That's what the joy of dancing, all the way back to the tribal days, is about. There's something inherently pleasurable about dancing and releasing energy to the music. And if you don't flush your system out, it's not as much a catharsis as when you just totally go out, and you leave there just spent, covered in sweat.

MAHONEY: And it flows. You can just feel it when it starts. It's like a recycler, just an infinite pattern—with people. Sometimes, you can definitely feel that energy, and you know that it's for real and that it's going on.

HEXUM: That's why the energy level is so different at radio fests. You have to play early in the day and it's usually reserved seating, so the energy level is so different to what it would be if there was a mosh pit. If the people right up in front are excited and dancing and cheering, it makes a world of difference. You've got to do the radio things to get out to the fans, but there's just no comparison. It's just so much funner to do our own shows.

GW: Getting into a pocket is like falling—you have to let it happen. But that upbeat, jumping-around energy almost demands that you kind of push the issue a little. So I'm guessing that it's tricky to get to that level of energy and just let the groove happen.

MAHONEY: Yeah, get it controlled. It's hard to control it, definitely.

HEXUM: I guess we learned some lessons from trying to rock out too hard right from the get-go. Back in the day, we would start out with a really high-energy song like 'Freak Out,' and just go off too hard right at the beginning. Now, we've learned to start with a song that is familiar, just get into the groove, and then wait and put 'Freak Out," which is maybe our most high-energy, wild song, third. So we get into the control mode first, find the pocket, find the groove, and then gradually get into it. Rather than just trying to explode from the top.

GW: I have to wonder about the audience, too. Back in the Sixties and Seventies, any teenager who sat down at a drum kit played pretty much the same basic rock beat — boom bap! Boom-boom bap! Now, what teens play is that fatback beat—dung bap! dugga dugga-dun bap!

MAHONEY: [*Laughs*] That's the only beat I know!

GW: It's like there was a genetic change or something. And I wonder, is there something about the times that makes that beat work now?

HEXUM: I don't know. It's an evolution thing. I don't know why I did this on stage today, but before one of our songs, I said, "This is the age of acceleration/Earth-stamping feet in celebration." It seems like music styles are changing so much faster. If you took, let's say, from the year 1210 to the year 1230, the music styles were probably not changing noticeably. But if you compare now to 20 years ago, things just keep getting faster and faster.

But it's exciting. It's exciting to think what we might be doing in the year 2000.

GW: And things go over much faster. The fact is that drum-n-bass has only been around a couple years, and Everything But the Girl have already had a pop hit that had a drum-n-bass sound to it.

HEXUM: Yeah, I know. I love jungle, because it's brand new. And that's the thing. There's always a new form of art; first there was rock and roll, then there was the psychedelics, then there was punk, and then there was rap. And there was ska somewhere in there. And there keeps being so many new ones—there was techno, there's acid jazz, there's trip-hop, there's jungle. And what-

that have a real solid audience and album sales without depending on radio. In fact, a lot of them aren't getting played on radio, period.

HEXUM: Right. There's bands that we really respect, like Pantera and Phish, that don't play the media game much yet still do great touring business and have huge loyalty from their fans. So when we talk about marketing and stuff like that now, we're more concerned with how to preserve the underground status that we have than with how to move tons of albums. We want to make sure to maintain what we've got, and preserve the vibe that we've created.

And we don't want to overexpose ourselves. We've finally gotten to the point where we're turning things down—things that we would have jumped at before. Because MTV isn't worried about overexposing you; they want to have you on all the time, once you're hitting. So at some point you've got to say, "Thanks, but no thanks."

GW: You mentioned the big reality check you got when you realized that there was no format for a rock/rap mix. But it's astounding that people still think that merging rock and hip-hop is a radical thing to do. If you go back a decade, there were plenty of records that mixed the two, like Run-D.M.C.'s "Rock Box," the version of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" that Sir Mix-A-Lot did with Metal Church, and of course Anthrax's "I'm the Man" collaboration with Public Enemy on the remake of "Bring The Noise."

HEXUM: L.L. Cool J was into distortion in his earlier stuff.

GW: Even before that, DJs were using Aerosmith, Billy Squier and Queen for breakbeats. The connection goes way back.

HEXUM: Run-D.M.C. called themselves the "Kings of Rock," know what I'm saying? It seems like some people are trying to push hip-hop farther away from rock, but they have the same roots.

GW: Well, I can understand why some people would want to, as Offspring put it, "keep 'em separated," but have you ever had an audience react like, "No, this shouldn't go together"?

HEXUM: When we opened for Public Enemy in Glasgow, there was some guy who, between songs, yelled, "We came for hip-hop, not rock and roll." So we weren't hip-hop enough for them in Glasgow, Scotland. But that's the only time I can think of anything like that happening.

The tour we did with Pharcyde and Cypress Hill is the only co-bill we've ever done with hip-hop acts, but it went off totally smoothly. And we hung out with those

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KEVIN KNIGHT

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guys a lot, and it was all good.

GW: That doesn't seem too surprising, though, because Pharcyde has always struck me as having kind of an acid rock mentality, and it's easy to hear a connection between your sound and Cypress Hill's. So it kind of makes sense.

HEXUM: Yeah, it does. Like SA's rap on the song "Down"—"Have you ever made out in"—is a little bit similar to Bootie Brown of Pharcyde's style.

Some of the elements of our music are hardcore hip-hop, but we do come more from the garage band stance. I think the big difference is, when you're in a garage band, you

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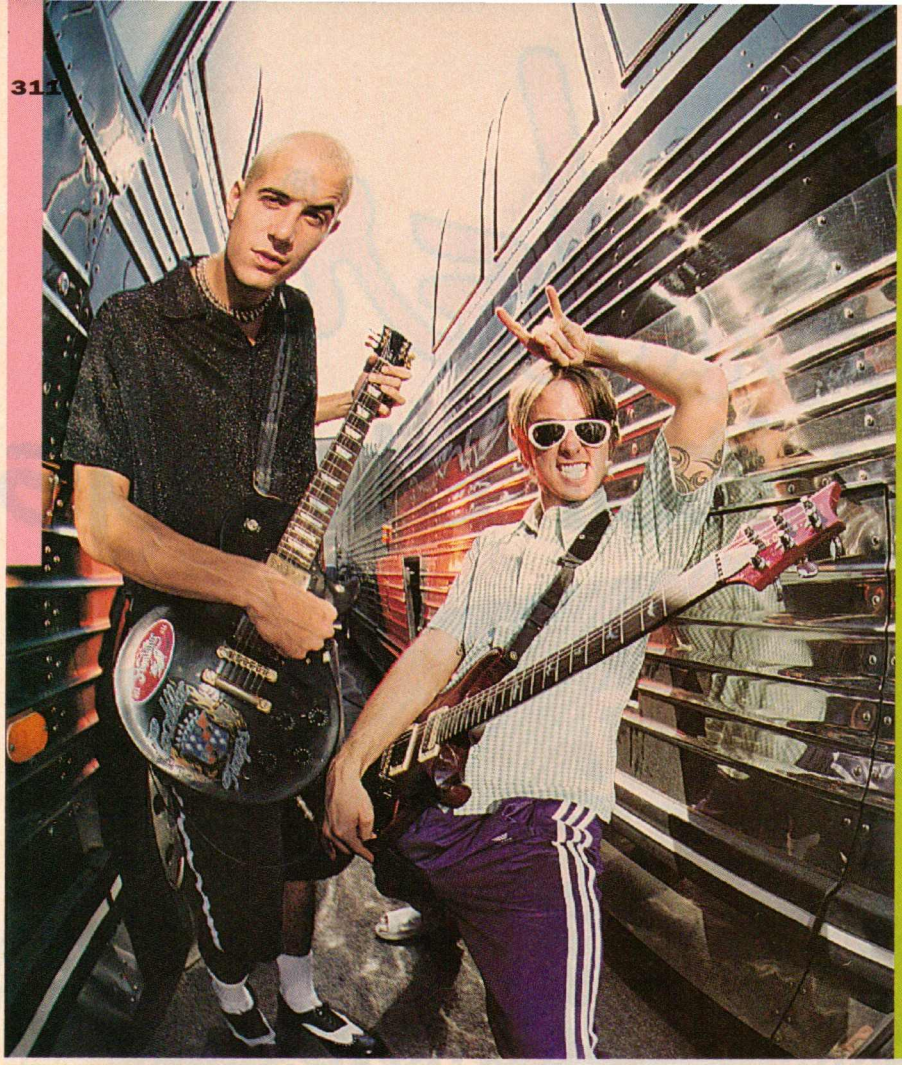
ever kind of style we're trying to go for. It's like there's infinite ground to cover, so it's really exciting.●



FRONTING: To be a fake, project an attitude. From the phrase "false front."

HIP-HOP: The urban culture from which rap was born. Originally, hip-hop also included break-dancing and some graffiti art; now the term generally refers to just rap or rap-oriented music.

JUNGLE: What drum-n-bass was called before some practitioners objected to the term's racial overtones.

TECHNO: An extremely fast (120 bpm or so) dance music relying almost entirely on synthesizers, drum machines and computers. Techno began in Detroit, but was first popularized in Belgium and Britain. Some well-known techno performers include Moby, L.A. Style, the Prodigy and Messiah. Among techno's offshoots are ambient, trance and drum-n-bass.

TRIP-HOP: A cross between acid jazz and hip-hop with a strong psychedelic bent, trip-hop relies heavily on samples and loops, but also uses live instruments. The style also has a more guitar-oriented sound than techno and its cousins.

TRICKY: English trip-hop artist who has worked with Björk and Massive Attack in addition to releasing his own albums.—J.D.C.

RAFAEL FUCHS