

How five guys from Omaha constructed a unique pastiche of rock, hip-hop and reggae, and took their '90s stoner sound to the top of the charts.

The 4:20 On 311

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SITTING: P-NUT AND TIM. STANDING: S.A., CHAD AND NICK.

It's a May day in L.A.,

crisp and hot. From my 12th-floor room in the Roosevelt Hotel I can see the Hollywood Hills, dotted with homes and a Chinese restaurant you walk up a steep incline to get to, no cars allowed. On the other side of the range is the San Fernando Valley. That's where I'll be heading shortly—in a green BMW convertible, top down, of course. After a 15-minute ride we arrive at NRG Studios, where 311 are wrapping up final touches on their fourth Capricorn album, *Transistor*.

Five years ago, the boys from Omaha moved here seeking fame and fortune, or something like that. It worked. Guitarist and kind-bud connoisseur Tim Mahoney, bassist P-Nut (nee Aaron Wills), drummer Chad Sexton and high-pitched rapper S.A. Martinez are celebrating four months of hard work on the band's follow-up to its double-platinum self-titled breakthrough album. A gargantuan glass bong is being passed around and a bottle of Cristal champagne is about to be uncorked. Only lead singer and resident frontman Nick Hexum is missing—he left the day before, in need of immediate R & R. The band will chill at their various homes around the L.A. area for a week before leaving for a European tour. They're especially looking forward to the Amsterdam stop.

Numerologists might wonder how 311 got their name (it's the Omaha police code for skinny-dipping), but 4:20 clearly suits this heavy-weed-smoking quintet. The bud Mahoney breaks off, he believes, is related to one of the Cannabis Cup winners. He stares at a HIGH TIMES centerfold and compares.

"This was grown hydroponically," the guitarist explains. "It's not very dense. It needs CO₂ and a better drying technique. But it's getting there."

The first time I met 311 was at Wetlands, the New York club that caters to hippie bands. It was 1993, and they were touring behind *Music*, an album that contained two marijuana masterpieces, "My Stoney Baby" and the prescient "Hydroponic." Mahoney impressed me with his kind-bud stash. While most bands beg for weed on the road, 311 were all set.

The next time they came to New York, supporting their second album, *Grassroots*, 311 filled Irving Plaza, a mid-size 1,000-capacity venue. As the line stretched around the corner, I realized that one of the best-kept stoner-

band secrets was suddenly out of the box. 311's hybrid of rock, hip-hop and reggae had, to my surprise, caught on. With Mahoney's guitar alternating between the light touch of Jerry Garcia and the hard edge of Pantera's Dimebag Darrell, I ventured to describe them as Bad Brains meet the Grateful Dead.

In 1995, when this magazine entered into an agreement with NORML and Capricorn to produce the benefit album *HEMPILATION*, 311 was the first band to sign on to the project. They went in the studio and laid down tracks for the *311* album as well as "Who's Got the Herb," a song written by the Bad Brains brother team of Paul (H.R.) and Earl Hudson and recorded by H.R.'s side group, Human Rights. It was a great selection and helped *HEMPILATION* eventually reach the coveted 100,000 sales mark two years later.

That must have been a good-luck recording session, because the *311* album, the band's third, proved to be a charm. One song, the smooth single "Down," became an MTV favorite, and gradually, the album zoomed into a stratosphere only dreamed of by bands.

Part of the success of both *311* and *HEMPILATION* had to be attributed to Capricorn's distribution switch to Polygram after leaving Sony/RED. Polygram's Mercury label took over responsibility for helping break Capricorn acts. 311 was their immediate priority.

"It seemed like that was the point when everything started to kick in," says P-Nut, who has the long limbs of a basketball player. "That was the muscle that Capricorn needed. They had good ideas, but it just didn't seem like they pushed hard enough. Mercury got things moving. They actually had a game plan."

That game plan included a series of tours that would bring 311 to New York's Roseland Ballroom (a 5,000-capacity venue) several times, first opening for Cypress Hill and then headlining a bill that introduced a little-known band called No Doubt. They earned a slot on both the HORDE and Warped tours and opened one of Kiss' Madison Square Garden shows.

For five relatively unassuming guys from Omaha, you couldn't have written a better script. They'd moved to Los Angeles in 1992 after growing up in the decriminalized-marijuana environment of Nebraska. Mahoney, Hexum and Sexton had gone to grade school together. Sexton met Martinez at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, and

Wills, the youngest in the group, knew Martinez through his older brother. Hexum and Sexton were the first to check out L.A.

"I visited them and liked it out here," Mahoney recalls. "They moved back to Omaha and started playing together. We wanted to keep growing as much as we could, so we decided to move out to Los Angeles. We just went for it. We rented a three-bedroom condo with a swimming pool. We were totally broke and isolated, so we just all concentrated on music."

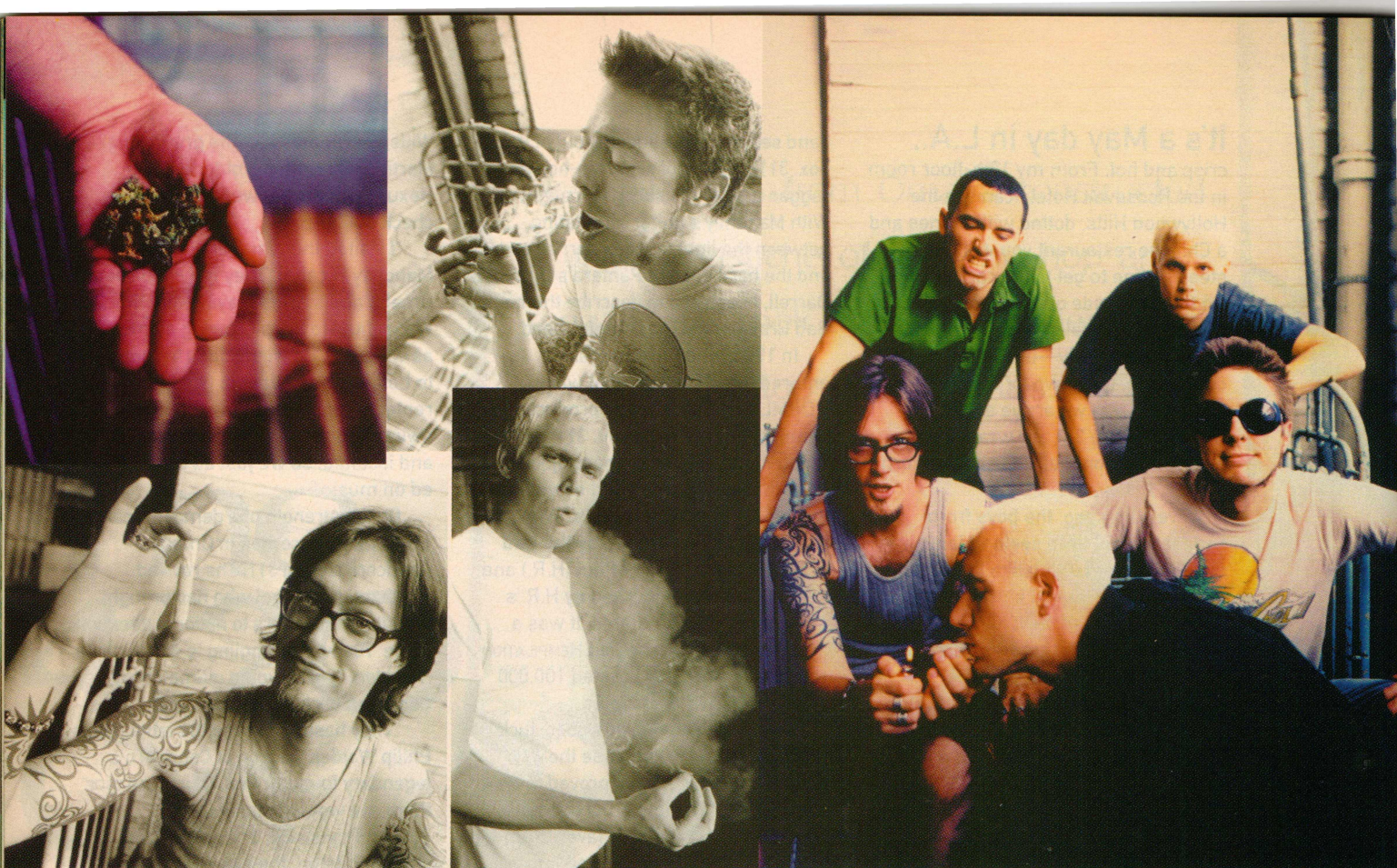
On the strength of a demo CD (called *Unity*) they'd recorded in Omaha, Capricorn signed 311. The revived Southern-rock label who had brought the Allman Brothers to national attention in the '70s was struggling to establish its '90s identity. 311 would ultimately put Capricorn back on the map.

"They basically saved the label," says Philip Walden Jr., son of Capricorn's legendary founder, Phil. "If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't be around."

For *Transistor*, 311 promoted Scotch Ralston, their sound engineer and virtual sixth member, to coproducer status. He replaced Ron St. Germain, who gave *311* its polish. The prolific band wrote 30 songs for *Transistor* and decided to include 21 of them on the 74-minute CD. While in the studio, they also recorded a version of "White Man in Hammersmith Palais" for the upcoming Clash tribute.

Though the album debuted at No. 4 on the *Billboard* 200, it has received less than favorable reviews. Calling *Transistor* "a lunatic pastiche of pop idioms that demonstrates they're too callow to recognize the thin line between experimentation and self-indulgence," *Entertainment Weekly* gave it a failing grade. In awarding it just two stars, *Rolling Stone* whined that "platinum-selling Nebraska cornhuskers 311 opt for Jamaican dub's sleepy parallel pothead universe. . . . But for the most part, 311 are trying much too hard to expand their sonic horizons." This, apparently, is a problem. Bands who attempt to stretch are accused of straying from what got them there, yet if they duplicate their previous efforts they're likely to be accused of coasting.

I've always liked 311's yin-and-yang approach. Perhaps being from the heartland has allowed them to rather innocently graft Midwest rock with urban rap into a winning formula. L.A.'s Rage Against the Machine are



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A HANDFUL OF GRASS, TIM INHALES, NICK LIGHTS UP, CHAD EXHALES, P-NUT SHOWS OFF A FATTIE.

the only other group to forge this path, but they do it with a lot more intensity. 311 are slower, subtler, more sophisticated; their music sort of floats by, as if on a cloud. Cushioned by Hexum's melodic vocals and Mahoney's laid-back guitar, Martinez and Wills provide counterpoint with the necessary funk, while Sexton deftly directs the constantly shifting song tempos.

"We probably wouldn't be included in a punk lineup or a reggae lineup," P-Nut acknowledges, "but we are trying to make our own niche. We've tried to do something unique since the beginning."

That uniqueness springs forth from many sources, one of which is the Grateful Dead. The last track on *Transistor*, "Stealing Happy Hours," with its nimble pace and noodling guitar, is clearly a tribute to Jerry Garcia. How did Garcia's death affect Mahoney, 311's resident Deadhead?

"It was just a drag," he frowns. "I couldn't believe it. It was a matter of time, I guess. I was bummed because I loved listening to him play live. No more Jerry. No more Jerry Band. No more live music just coming through the air like that. I would have loved to have met him. That was a big bummer. At least there are a lot of recordings of him playing live."

From the Dead to Bob Marley to P-Funk to Bad Brains, 311 have found a way to incorporate the key influences that have

inspired so many bands of this generation. Do they feel they have helped define the sound of music in the '90s?

P-Nut looks up after concentrating on a bong hit, then exhales a massive cloud of herb smoke. "That's more of a long-term thing," he declares. "It's gonna take a little more time to settle in, because there's so much going on and it's coming from so many different directions. A certain style isn't really defining music right now. It's a mishmash. If we're included in that I'd be really proud, but I don't know if that's been decided yet. There's still a couple of years left in this decade."

P-NUT ON POT

"Marijuana especially benefits the terminally ill. If it's gonna make somebody happier in the long run, what's the harm in that? If there was any proof that marijuana caused lung damage, then someone in the hierarchy of the US government would be screaming about it. All the research they've done has come out so favorable that they don't even want to publish it. It's such a weak thing.

"They should get a bill going to OK hemp farming in Nebraska. That's how farmers are going to get more control back into the economic cycle, because they're suffering bigger and bigger beat-downs, selling off land to the man. Hemp

is the crop that's going to bring the American farmer back into the cycle. It's sad as shit that they're not getting the chance because hemp is illegal. It grows so fast, takes so much less space than corn and you can make paper, clothes and fuel out of it. I read somewhere that there's a Jeep built out of hemp. It looked like the whole thing was made of hemp."

MAHONEY ON MARIJUANA

"We don't care if people know we smoke marijuana. We definitely think marijuana should be legalized or decriminalized, because you could use it as a resource and because it's your freedom of choice. It's up to each individual to decide what they want to do, no matter what it is, and not have to be thrown in jail, persecuted or whatever. It seems so obvious. In Nebraska, they could grow a lot of hemp to make a lot of paper to save a lot of trees. If you're farming corn, you could probably use just a small amount of your corn space to grow hemp.

"We should have the freedom to grow four plants at home and never have to buy pot again. Then you could just trade with your friends. That way, there's no criminal element. It'd be great if there was a store with a fine selection of pot you could buy, just like Scotch or cigars. That's the way it should be."*