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by Brian Collen

**In music lingo the term "crossover"** is usually used to define a band whose own sound combines a variety of musical styles and characteristics. These styles either parallel each other in some way or they contrast dramatically. Early on, Bad Brains mixed punk and reggae to distinguish themselves from other hardcore bands; Fishbone and 24-7 Spyz fused ska and rock; Faith No More played their hybrid version of dance metal; and the Chili Peppers funk up punk. In the '90s Urban Dance Squad made an impression with their unique blend of rap and rock, and the Beastie Boys dusted off their instruments and got back to their roots. Even thrash metal speedsters Anthrax put in their two cents with their cover of Public Enemy's "Bring The Noise."

Today there is a new breed of bands, one that has opted for an eclectic sound as opposed to a "set in stone" style. There's Rage Against the Machine, Primus, Beck, Phish... the list could go on. But one group in particular that has kicked a nice phat hole through the genre-crossing door is the band known as 311.

In 1990, vocalist Nick Hexum and drummer Chad Sexton, left Los Angeles to return to their hometown of Omaha, Nebraska after a brief try for success — their band, Unity, didn't quite work out as they had planned. A few months later they hooked up with guitarist Tim Mahoney, bassist P-Nut, and second vocalist SA Martinez, calling themselves 311.

That same year, after playing at friends' parties and sliding quietly into the Omaha club scene, their first album *Dammit!* was released on their own label and the band quickly gained a cult following among the high school and college kids around town. One person would buy their tape and would dub it for one of their friends who in turn would re-dub it for one of their friends and so on.

Early comparisons to the Chili Peppers and the Beastie Boys made the band a little angry. Although those bands were of course an influence, Nick states that 311 sounded like nobody else, "There's so few white funk bands out there that I guess when people see us and hear our style of music they automatically say that we sound like the Chili Peppers." But by the next year 311 had their own identity and had become "the band" that everyone was talking about. They released their second album, *Unity*, with a tremendous local response and began headlining shows every couple of weeks, bringing in a few hundred people every night who were ready to have a good time, well over the maximum occupancy allowed at most of the venues they played. Not bad for five pot-smokin' baggy-pants-wearin' midwestern white boys with guitars.

It was around this same time that 311 "turned into a bunch of

assholes." Well... not really, but that's how other local musicians, certain fans and friends perceived it. The words *attitude* and *ego* popped up every now and then when the band's name was mentioned. Nick explains it like this, "A lot of that shit was directed at me. I think that when you're playing rock music you're going to have to have a certain amount of confidence. Yah, compared to other bands in Omaha maybe we do have an attitude, but compared to bands in L.A. or New York we're like the nicest guys around. We just had the confidence to really set ourselves apart and get ourselves on the map." Putting the backlash behind them, they continued to play out. The growing crowd would get sardine-packed together and pogo up and down in unison to Sexton's kick drum.

In early '92, 311 made a crucial decision. They had just recorded their third release, *Hydroponic*, and had sent copies out to various record companies. They knew that the odds of making a national name for themselves were pretty slim if they were to stay in Omaha so they packed up their bags and moved to Van Nuys, California where they continued to write new songs and play gigs every so often. Within a few months they were approached by Capricorn Records, a division of Warner Bros. based out of Nashville, which had gotten a hold of one of 311's tapes from a representative out in CA. The label was highly interested. They would send some A&R guys to see what the band was all about — and what better place to do it than at their homecoming show back in Omaha. Capricorn's vice-president and general manager Don Schmitzerle was later quoted in *The Note*, a music and entertainment mag for the central states, as saying, "They own that town. That night, they had a real spark. It wasn't the rap that turned my head, but the fact that they did so many things so well. They do a little reggae, some funk, but the very essence of the band can't be la-

beled. I saw them as part of a larger whole." They were pretty much signed on the spot, becoming the first and only urban-sounding band on a primarily southern rock label.

**Music**, their debut on Capricorn, was released in February of '93. Except for four new songs, many of the tracks on it were actually earlier tunes from both *Unity* and *Hydroponic* re-arranged and recorded better, thanks to the excellent production work of Eddy Offord, a man whose credits include Yes' early albums, John Lennon, and the Dixie Dregs. With a video for "Do You Right" on MTV's *120 Minutes*, radio play and an excessive amount of touring to support the new album, 311 still had their cult following... only now it encompassed the entire country.

Late last year on their way back to Omaha, the band ran into a little trouble. The RV they were traveling in caught fire, destroying all their instruments, equipment, clothing and cash. Although no exact cause was ever determined, it didn't stop them from borrowing some friends' equipment and playing for their hometown crowd the next night — that doesn't sound like something a bunch of assholes would do...

July was an important month for the band. Besides it being their four-year anniversary, their second Capricorn album, entitled *Grassroots*, was released, the perfect follow-up picking up where *Music* left off. This new album features a much stronger sounding 311, due in part to the guitar being beefed up and the quick clever licks that Tim and P-Nut pull off together. In fact, Tim has become one hell of a guitar player over the past year. "He's just amazed us all in how he's improved." Nick comments, "Some of

the shit he's doing on this new album just fuckin' blows us away. When we started out we weren't really a guitar-oriented band. It was more bass, drums, and vocals while the guitar was just playing rhythm parts, but now he's really

stepped out into the forefront." Although Offord receives credit for co-production, the band pretty much produced and engineered the new album themselves. "We knew what we wanted this time" Also adding to the new sound is the fact that Nick and Chad are no longer the sole songwriters; all five members have songwriting credits on *Grassroots*.

Regarding the band's outspoken "smoke much pot" attitude, Nick is quick to say that, "It's not about joining the bandwagon; it's about saying for the record that we smoke weed and it should be legal." He adds, "I think it will become decriminalized because people realize that filling up jails with stoners when there's carjacks out on the streets is just stupid."

How does 311 view their success? Hexum sums it up: "At the beginning of last year we said, 'God, I hope the radio plays our music. God, I hope that MTV plays the video.' Now we're finally in a position where we've got a nationwide fan base and our new record is selling really well, regardless of what MTV or anyone else does. If MTV plays our shit, that's great. But it's not really needed 'cause we're a grassroots, a word of mouth thang. We're so appreciative of our fans. We realize that the whole reason that we're able to do this is because these people like our music and we're really grateful for that." ■



Play That Funky Music, White Boys