



Alex Solca

CHAD SEXTON: A Free Spirit to the Corps

Chad Sexton and 311 have been riding a wave of good vibes for over twenty years. Since the band's 1993 debut album, *Music*, which followed several independent releases, there have been no hiatuses, no lineup changes, and no periods of bizarre musical experimentation. The band members have stayed true to themselves and the promises they made to each other when they were still teenagers back in Omaha, Nebraska: Love life, love music, and be a great live band. A 311 concert remains a communal experience, and at its epicenter sits Chad Sexton, melodically fusing grooves that are hard to resist—and not exactly easy to cop either.

"If you're a musician," Sexton has said, "you're supposed to serve, not be wrapped up in your ego." This simple yet meaningful sentiment is an excellent springboard to a discussion of Chad's musical gifts, which have influenced drummers, other types of instrumentalists, and non-musicians alike. Over the years, 311 has amassed fan mail from around the globe, revealing how the band's music, specifically the rhythms, has helped listeners get through challenging times. Sexton's contributions have not only resonated with fans, they have resonated *within* them—an influence that touches on the elements of music that connect people to the "universal pulse" that transcends the superficial barriers of human existence.

Sexton took up drumming in second grade and eventually became absorbed by the vinyl soundscapes of Led Zeppelin, Steely Dan, and Kiss, which bounced off the walls of his childhood home in the late '70s. Early influences like John Bonham and Steve Gadd laid the foundation for the opposing approaches that later converged in Chad's unique sound: on one hand, the raw, unhinged energy and imaginative exploration of rock, prog, and jazz, and on

the other, the strict precision of Neil Peart and drum corps. The key ingredient in the recipe for the drummer's developing style, however, was his free-spirited personality, which allowed him to find a balance between the carefree and the tightly regimented. Later, Sexton found creative inspiration in musicians such as Jaco Pastorius, Frank Zappa, and John McLaughlin, whose songwriting and musicianship explored previously uncharted territories, and whose recordings introduced Chad to drummers like Narada Michael Walden, Vinnie Colaiuta, and Terry Bozzio.

Drummers who cite Sexton as a main influence are perhaps unknowingly showing an indirect appreciation for drum corps. Corps legends Tom Float and Ralph Hardimon may be unfamiliar to some *MD* readers, but their style had a tremendous impact on Chad's approach to the drumkit. For kit players, pulse tends to be associated with the low end of the bass drum, and a drummer's feel is more about the placement of the backbeat. It might seem counterintuitive to drumset players without a corps background, but Sexton's pulse is actually in his backbeat, while his touch

and feel are defined by all the ghost notes, accents, and syncopated kick patterns that lock in his bandmates.

The power of Sexton's time and groove is also inseparable from 311's song arrangements. Sexton composes on the kit as if his limbs are independent drum corps sections, with his kick dynamically even-keeled compared with what he's playing on the cymbals and toms. He creates a fluid motion even when the parts are chopped and syncopated, which fosters a trancelike groove. This approach is why Chad is unique. It's why he's cited as an influence by so many drummers, and it's a big reason why 311 continues to be so successful.

Sexton remains a humble student, never letting his notoriety impede on his chance to learn something new. If he hears someone shredding a kit at his San Fernando Valley drum shop, Drum City—whether it's a well-known drummer like Chris Coleman, Thomas Pridgen, or Ronald Bruner Jr. or some unknown teenager—he'll jump at the chance to ask how a certain lick is played. Sexton's ability to separate confidence from arrogance shows his maturity as a person and promotes his peaceful acceptance of his place in music history and the universe. This creates an ongoing cycle of inspiration chauffeured by the positive karmic vibrations that he and 311 have been pumping into the atmosphere for more than two decades.

David Ciauro

Chad Sexton's grooves are characterized by a laid-back intensity akin to a heartbeat—a subliminally hypnotic pulse that breathes life into 311's music—and a signature snare sound, which has garnered enough myth and mystique to spawn numerous online forums. Another Chad, Breaking Benjamin's Chad Szeliga, said in his October 2010 *MD* feature, "**When you hear Chad Sexton hit his snare, you know it's him.**"

