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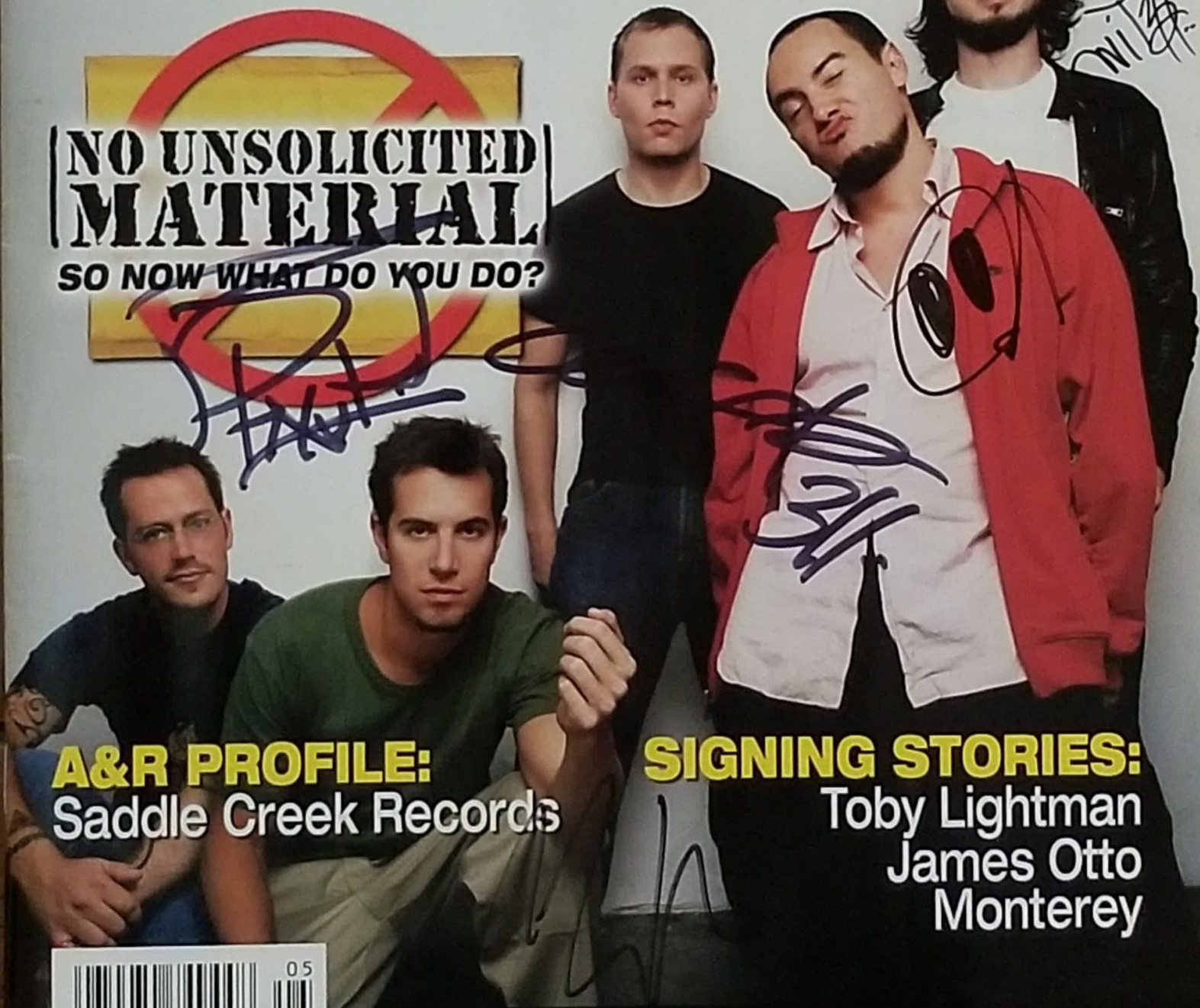
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FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY

by Scott Perham

311 HAS TRAVELED THE HARD ROAD TO SUCCESS.

The band members grew up together, almost blew up in their van together, lost all of their equipment, sued their record label and have still managed to sell nearly seven million records.

Now, nearly 14 years after its first performance, 311 continues to carve a unique path through the center of modern music.

Born in 1990, 311 created its own reggae- and funk-infused brand of rap/rock years before that musical hybrid hit the scene. Also releasing three independent albums on the band's own imprint (What Have You Records), 311 managed to gather an impressive grassroots following before the quintet ever got snatched up by a label. Since then, this influential group has released seven studio albums, had multiple top ten hits, built its own recording studio, released two popular behind-the-scenes videos, resurrected the What Have You label and organized an annual "311 Day" concert extravaganza for its fans.

In the wake of its latest studio album, the aptly titled *Evolver*, the L.A.-based outfit continues to break new ground by contributing a cover of the Cure's "Love Song" to the new Adam Sandler comedy, *50 First Dates*. But how does this level of mainstream success affect a band with such independent roots? 311's lead vocalist Nick Hexum and bass player P-Nut took some time out in between tours to assure *Music Connection* that, as the band forges into the future, they will undoubtedly continue to "come original."

Grassroots

In the early Nineties, grunge was beginning to emerge in Seattle and capture the attention of musicians across the country. In Omaha, NE, however, the members of what would become 311 were blending funk and reggae with what would soon become known as rap/rock, and laying the foundation of the next major musical movement.

Though all five band members grew up in the same area of Omaha, it wasn't until 311's vocalist Nick Hexum, drummer Chad Sexton and bass player P-Nut first joined forces with a local guitarist named Jim Watson that the band's signature sound began to coalesce. "Our first show was opening up for Fugazi," recalls P-Nut. "That was on June 10, 1990. We actually played under the name Fish Hippos, but that's generally regarded as the first 311 show, and it should be."

The band soon changed its name to 311 (the police code for indecent exposure) and began to conquer the Omaha music circuit. Despite the band's growing fanbase, Watson didn't mesh with the other members of the band and guitarist Tim Mahoney was asked to join the team instead. Shortly thereafter, a local rapper SA Martinez started to join the band onstage and improvise some raps over the music. A welcomed addition to the band's sound, Martinez was soon brought on as a full-fledged member and the 311 lineup was officially complete.

Considering the geographical limitations of the Cornhusker State, however, vocalist Nick Hexum was prepared to do whatever it took to get the band to the next level. Hexum recalls, "We made three albums in '90 and '91 on our own label, What Have You Records, called *Dammit*, *Unity* and *Hydroponic*. I took out a student loan and maxed out my credit cards to get us the studio time. *Dammit* and *Hydroponic* were just tape only, and *Unity* was a CD that sold really well locally and kind of made us local Nebraska stars. The *Unity* CD also served as our demo to shop."

Despite the band's substantial local following and impressive grassroots record sales, it was proving to be too difficult to capture label attention in Omaha. Mutually agreeing to pull up their roots and relocate west, each member busted open his piggy bank and headed off to Southern California to bring the group's cornfed buzz to the big leagues.

Reconsidering Everything

"The five of us moved to (L.A. suburb) Van Nuys and all shared a house there. Luckily, we got signed shortly thereafter to Capricorn, which was the only label at all interested in us," Hexum recalls. "We were really lucky, because we moved out to L.A. with all the money we had saved up and, just as it all had run out, Capricorn signed us. They were part of Warner Brothers at that time. So even though we didn't know much about the label, we were like, 'Fuck it. If it's part of Warner Brothers and they want to sign us, let's do it.'"

After releasing its Capricorn Records debut, entitled *Music*, the band headed right back out on the road to support it. Though the band members expected the tour to be a bit different this time around, they could never have predicted what lay on the road ahead. Nick Hexum recalls, "We had an R.V. fire on tour and we lost all of our instruments — and Chad's father's R.V. that he'd lent us to tour with. I was burned on my body and my hair was burned up. And, we lost all our clothes and equipment."

Scrambling to come up with a way to continue being productive — namely, to buy new instruments and keep touring — the band approached their label with a simple proposition. They asked for a \$20,000 advance on the second album's recording

budget. But, according to Hexum, "The fuckin' asshole at Capricorn said, 'We'll only do that if you sign away half of your publishing.' So I said, 'Fuck you.'"

Instead, the band took out a loan from a friend and managed to continue the tour. But the incident laid the initial groundwork for a turbulent future between the members of 311 and their brand new record label, Capricorn.

Come Original

Still under its binding contract with Capricorn, 311 continued to focus on recording and getting its positive message out to as

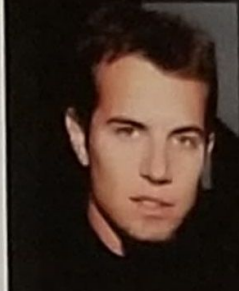
many people as possible. The band's second album, *Grassroots*, was a big hit among 311 fans and the quintet continued to do well on the road. But when its self-titled third album came out, the scene had caught up with them just enough to rocket 311 into the mainstream. As Nick Hexum recalls, "We didn't have a chance in hell of getting on the radio until we kicked the door in with 'Down.' It was a huge deal to get that song on the radio in '96, and then there was a flood of bands with a similar sound that came right after us."

With the two singles from the albums *Down* and *All Mixed Up* reaching No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, on *Billboard's* Modern Rock chart, the swell in the band's success enabled 311 to release its first, now platinum, behind-the-scenes video, *Enlarged to Show Detail*. "We have fun for a living, like almost all bands. We have cameras, and I'm kind of a director at heart, so it was a really fun thing to get into," claims P-Nut. "We started filming as much stuff as possible, collaborating with fans and friends on live footage and interesting interview stuff. It's just another layer to throw into the band. We have a fanbase where, even if we're not on the radio, we still have enough people who will buy it. And that makes it worthwhile."

Omaha Stylee

Following the success generated by the record and the video, 311 was soon touring the world and performing to much larger crowds than before. The band released the album *Transistor* the following year and was soon getting requests for some of the vintage 311 material from its fans. Nick Hexum recalls, "So many people were bugging us for that early Omaha shit. So we went through the best of the Omaha years and remixed some of the stuff, remastered all of it, and called it the *Omaha Sessions*. It's only available through our Web site, and it's on What Have You Records, the label we released our first three records on."

With the independent success of the nine-song EP, Hexum realized that What Have You Records could also serve as a home for more acts than just 311. "I'm gonna turn it into a real label because there's a lot of great music out there," claims Hexum. "There are some incredible bands that haven't gotten



"They were, like, 'Screw you. We'll do what we want and you're forced in your contract to give us albums'"
— Nick Hexum

signed, and there's other incredible bands that don't have a label that appreciates them."

Just two months after releasing the *Omaha Sessions* EP and dusting off its old label, the band put out its much anticipated live album, simply titled *311 Live*, and headed back into the studio to start work on a new release.

Applied Science

Today, with five studio albums under its belt, a more experienced 311 approached the recording process of its next album from a completely different angle.

Nick Hexum recalls, "When it came time to make *Soundsystem* I was like, 'Look, what if we just rented a studio building? Instead of paying 2,000 dollars a day, what if we spent 3,000 a month renting a building?' That's when we rented what's now called Glenwood Place in Burbank. We leased that for a year and a half, and we built our own studio in there. Then we were like, 'Fuck renting, let's own.'"

The members of 311 then found just the right studio to call home for the rest of their career. Though the one that they found had a history behind it, 311 stripped and gutted the place and renamed it "The Hive" after 311's dedicated fanclub of the same name. "We found this studio in North Hollywood that was once known as The Chateau," Hexum relates. "The building has a lot of history, but we totally renovated it and gutted it. We bought the property. We bought a mixing board from R. Kelly. We have two, 24-track analog tape machines, as well as all the latest ProTools stuff. Now we never have to rent another studio space again."

Time to Throw Down

Hand in hand with the band's newfound independence, 311 decided it was time to talk turkey with Capricorn. "We still had various discrepancies with the label," claims Hexum, "and since they had been jumping around distributors and doing joint ventures we — as their most successful band — wanted to have a say in that. And they were, like, 'Screw you. We'll do what we want and you're forced in your contract to give us albums. That's all you have to say about it.' We were like, 'No, screw you. You're sued. We're getting out of our contracts.'"

Citing the California seven year rule and Capricorn's loss of major-label affiliation, 311 managed to construct a solid legal case, but still had to bend a little to cut all ties with the now-defunct label. "To actually get out of our contract scot-free and be a free agent was gonna be a long shot," Hexum explains. "So what we settled on was, with our approval, Capricorn selling us to Volcano Records."

The following year the band released their Volcano/Jive debut, *From Chaos*, and finally got to see the effects of proper artist representation. Following the mainstream success of the album, 311 released its seventh studio CD, *Evolver*, last July, as well as a brand-new behind-the-scenes video, *Enlarged to Show Detail 2: "Volcano/Jive worked wonders on From Chaos,"* claims P-Nut. "They definitely helped the song 'Amber' to get on the radio and turn it into the longest-running rock song of 2002."

Evolver

Continually finding new ways to spread its sound around, 311 has recently ventured into the multidimensional world of motion pictures. Lending a cover of the Cure's "Love Song" to the soundtrack of Adam Sandler's new movie, *50 First Dates*, the band continues to acquire more and

more fans — an idea that shouldn't worry those who've been loyal from the beginning. "It would have been stupid of us not to do it," claims P-Nut. "I know we're getting criticized by some of our more egg-headed fans who don't see that what we want to do is raise the bar. And that doesn't include watering down the content of what we do just because more people are watching."

Less than a month after the release date for the movie, 311 will also host its annual "311 Day" concert in New Orleans on — you guessed it — March 11th. Drawing fans from across the country, the marathon concert was designed to give a little bit back to the band's biggest supporters. "People are going to be force-fed everything that we've done over the past 13 years," P-Nut promises for this year's performance. "We've got a few tricks up

our sleeve this time," adds Hexum. "There's gonna be songs that 311 fans have wanted to hear that they've never heard live before, and there's maybe gonna be some cover songs. We've always had some sideshow stuff, too. We've had contortionists and high wire acts — it's like a circus atmosphere. The last one we did was over four hours long. This year we're not shooting for length. We're shooting for just an incredible, three-hour-and-eleven-minute show."

Unity

With a greatest hits disc tentatively scheduled for a summer release and, as always, more touring on the horizon, 311 shows no signs of slowing down in their 14th year as a unit. But sometimes from chaos comes order, and as far as P-Nut is concerned, the band owes at least some of its success to its early days of strife and struggle.

"We were living on gas money when we started," he recalls. "And as far as touring, we weren't taking anything home. We were just going out and playing shows for people, which is really a fun way to start. It's great that we didn't get media attention then, because we may not have learned as much as we did in the early stages, which has kept us together in this latter part of our career."

One of the most important things that the band members learned is that, as long as they've got each other, the magical music will keep on flowing. "We respect each other," Hexum states with evident affection. "The key is that we lucked upon a very special chemistry. We do better together than we could ever do separately, and we would never want to fuck with that recipe. As far as I'm concerned, 311 should — and will — stay together till the day we die."

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