



311

American rap-rock band

Formed 1991 in Omaha, Nebraska

“... There has to be some correlation between your musical and lyrical content and how the people who are following you act. I just want to feel that my influence is positive.”

—Nick Hexum, *Rolling Stone*,
December 9, 1999

Coming from Omaha, Nebraska—not known for its musical activity—311 built a following, as lead singer and guitarist Nick Hexum has said, “One fan at a time.” By relentless touring, the five-piece band established a fan base for their upbeat rock/ska/reggae/hip-hop sound, and they did so with a minimum of radio or video exposure.

With the success of their self-titled third album in 1995, 311 rose from the status of a marginal road band to an MTV favorite. “It’s kind of funny,” Hexum later told *Rolling Stone*. “We finally had gotten to a place where we really didn’t need MTV and everything because we could make a living through touring. And I always kind of thought that when we didn’t need them, they would come to the plate. And it happened.”

Debate-team punk

In high school, Hexum (born April 12, 1970) was an unusual combination of bad boy and smart kid: he listened to punk rock,

Tim Mahoney, Nick Hexum, Chad Sexton, P-Nut, and S.A. Martinez. (Capricorn Records. Reproduced by permission.)

and often got into trouble, but he was also a member of the school debate team—and its jazz band. During the late 1980s, Hexum began playing in a number of groups with guitarist Tim Mahoney (born February 17, 1970); vocalist and deejay S. A. (Douglas) Martinez (born October 29, 1970); bassist P-Nut (Aaron Wills; born June 5, 1974); and drummer Chad Sexton (born September 17, 1970).

By 1991 they had formed 311, and they soon signed a deal with Capricorn, a small record label. What followed were some hard years of touring as the band set out on the road to conquer America from the ground up. In 1993, the year they debuted with *Music*, their RV and trailer caught fire on a Missouri highway, and virtually all their possessions burned up in the ensuing blaze.

Yet the members of 311 soldiered on, and during those hardest years of the early to mid-1990s they either opened for, or headlined with, other groups destined to make a name for themselves, including **KoRN**, **No Doubt**, and **Sugar Ray** (see entries). The title of *Grassroots* (1994) reflected their strategy of taking their music directly to the fans, but as with its predecessor, the album's sales hardly made a dint in the market.

The mainstream finds 311

All of that changed with *311* (1995), which sold more than 3 million copies and yielded an MTV hit with the video for "Down." Of that song, which a *Rolling Stone* journalist described as "a shout-out to [311's] grassroots fans," Hexum said, "Yeah, I had a good feeling

about the song because it had that hook that I kept singing, and then everyone else started singing it. But it is ironic that it would be a grassroots message that would bring us to the mainstream."

The mainstream, however, was changing, as Hexum himself noted in a *Rolling Stone* interview: "When *Music* came out, everyone was still really into grunge, and now I think people are moving away from straight rock and getting into bands like No Doubt, Goldfinger, and KoRN. They are hybrid bands such as ourselves with either ska or hip-hop elements. I just think it's time that people are appreciating cross-genre stuff."

A range of influences

Among the musical influences cited by members of 311 are everything from Public Enemy and Ice Cube to **Beck**, the **Red Hot Chili Peppers** (see entries), the Clash, and the Smiths. Critics have also compared them to the **Beastie Boys** and **Rage Against the Machine** (see entries).

"I figure that if I sort of sensitized my brain to only natural highs, the experience of playing gigs would be more totally uplifting. . . . Now I can feel the energy and heat coming off the crowd."

With regard to **Rage**, however, Hexum told Wade Chamberlain in a 1995 interview with *Rational Alternative Digital*, "If you listen to [both bands'] albums side by side, you're gonna feel good after listening to our albums, and you're gonna feel pissed after listening to their albums. And we're very proud of that. I don't really get into the screaming part, the whole, 'you're gonna burn' over and over again."

Bands with Numbers in Their Names

U2 (see entry)

Three Dog Night

3 Doors Down

Third Eye Blind (see entry)

The Four Seasons

The Four Tops

Gang of Four

Ben Folds Five

Jackson 5

MC5

Pizzicato Five

L 7

7 Mary 3

10CC

Heaven 17

Matchbox Twenty (see entry)

20/20

.38 Special

UB40

Level 42

Black 47

The B-52s

54-40

Sham 69

The 77s

98 Degrees (see entry)

Haircut 100

112

Blink-182 (see entry)

311

10,000 Maniacs



The role of drugs

Certainly 311 takes a positive approach in their music, but one thing many listeners might find less positive is their outspoken approval of marijuana, symbolized by a sign on the door of their recording studio reading "Work-

Free Drug Zone." (See sidebar, "What Is It About Musicians and Drugs?" with **Smashing Pumpkins** entry.)

As vocal as they are in support of pot, however, members of 311 have been just as strong in their disapproval of harder drugs such as cocaine. And, reported *Rolling Stone's* Mark Binelli in late 1999, "Hexum has given up pot for 311's current theater tour. 'I figure that if I sort of sensitized my brain to only natural highs, the experience of playing gigs would be more totally uplifting, because there'd be nothing in the way,' he says. 'Now I can feel the energy and heat coming off the crowd.'"

Controlling their own destiny

The success of 311 resulted in still more touring, with the group only taking out time to record what became *Transistor* (1997). The latter, at seventy-four minutes, was about as long as a single CD can be.

"When a band has success like we did with our last album," Hexum told *Rolling Stone*, "they've earned the rights to call their own shots on their next record." This desire to control their own destiny would ultimately lead to a lawsuit against their record company, which the members of 311 maintained had failed to provide them with adequate marketing support.

In the meantime, 311 released a live album, and in 1999 opened for **KISS** (see entry). While on the road in 1999, they recorded *Soundssystem*. The latter, its name perhaps a reference to the fact that they were using portable recording

equipment, found them returning to a straight hard-rock sound with less ska and reggae. Late in 2000, with their suit against Capricorn Records still pending, the members of 311 were busy recording a new album.

Selected Awards

Platinum certification, *Transistor*, 1997.

Multi-platinum certification (3 million sales), *311*, 1998.



Selected Discography

Music (Capricorn), 1993.

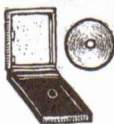
Grassroots (Capricorn), 1994.

311 (Capricorn), 1995.

Transistor (Capricorn), 1997.

311 Live (Capricorn), 1998.

Soundsystem (Capricorn), 1999.



Further Reading

Binelli, Mark. "311: Giving Rap Metal a Good Name." *Rolling Stone*, December 9, 1999, p. 31.



"Radio Heads." *Rolling Stone*, July 16, 1999.

Swenson, Kyle. "Amalgamated Metal." *Guitar Player*, November 1999, p. 64.

"311 Makes It Out of the Grass and Into the Green." *Rolling Stone*, October 24, 1999.

Vineyard, Jennifer. "311 Give Up the 411 on Next Album." *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 2000.

Vineyard, Jennifer and Troy J. Augusto. "311 File Suit Against Their Record Label." *Rolling Stone*, August 31, 2000.

Contact Information

The 311 Hive (fan club)

8904 Florence Dr.

Omaha, NE 68147

Web Sites

Enter Gate 311. <http://www.valdosta.peachnet.edu/~mc Reynol/threleven> (accessed on January 12, 2001).

311 Music.com (official site). <http://www.311music.com> (accessed on January 12, 2001).

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