

PLANET WEEKLY

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TUSCALOOSA'S SOURCE FOR ENTERTAINMENT, MUSIC, SPORTS & THE ARTS

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HIGH **TIDE** SPORTS

For a band like 311, which is now 26 years into its career, there's been no question about whether the group needs to make new albums, according to vocalist Nick Hexum.

Some veteran bands (Aerosmith and Styx being prime examples) have debated whether there's any point to making new music. In today's streaming/downloading world, album sales have nose-dived to where it's difficult to recoup the expenses that go into a new album. And with deep catalogs of fan-favorite songs, groups like Aerosmith and Styx — as well as 311 — don't need new material for their concerts. Audiences are happy to hear the hits and prime album tracks.

But Hexum says 311 is as intent as ever on making new albums, and in fact could finish its next studio album before the end of the year. Whether doing a new album makes economic sense is really not the issue for 311.

"Right now we feel so fired up about the new music," Hexum said. "I remember when Aerosmith came out with that [quote] 'There's no point in making a new album,' I kind of felt like if you were making songs that you were as excited about or were as good as 'Sweet Emotion,' you would just do it. You wouldn't take no for an answer. You would put out that record. So I just think it varies from band to band. Some bands get really pigeonholed in a certain style, so that's what I love about (us) insisting on being eclectic. Therefore, if we were like AC/DC or something, where people expected a really specific sound, that might be hard to keep going past 30 years. But for us, we can just transition into other cool styles that feel fresh. And as long as the fan base hangs with us, we're all good."

At the moment, 311 is out headlining its Unity tour, which runs through August. Hexum and his bandmates, drummer Chad Sexton, bassist P-Nut, guitarist Tim Mahoney and vocalist/deejay SA Martinez, will certainly be focused on putting on the best shows they can.

But in talking to Hexum during a mid-June phone interview, it's also clear that thoughts about the next 311 studio album won't be far from his mind either. He said it's likely the band will work on a few of its unfinished songs during the tour and be ready to finish the next album not long after the group members come off of the road.

The band got busy on the album early this year, hitting the studio before 311 Day, the two-night stand March 11 and 12 in New Orleans, where the band played special extended shows for its diehard fans.

"We went in two batches and we finished up eight songs before 311 Day," Hexum said. "We're on batch two, which probably has four songs so far. So really we do have an album worth done, a regular length album. Over summer we'll be able to finish out a few more. Then the first batch is already recorded for real... So that's good to know we have basically the core of the album done. Then we'll come home and finish up batch two and put it out."

What has Hexum particularly excited is that the next album is taking 311 in some

311 // UNITY TOUR



new musical directions.

"I think we're more influenced by more modern stuff on this one," Hexum said, describing the in-progress album. "We kind of go through cycles where sometimes we're happy just doing like bread and butter 311 styles. And maybe that, to me, I love it on (the band's previous album) 'Stereolithic,' but the rap-rock and stuff like that, that was a little bit more looking back. And I would say this current batch is a little bit more looking forward, like let's make sure these tunes don't sound like anything else we've done before. So there's a lot more uniqueness in the current batch. That's exciting. I don't feel there's any end in sight with new ideas. It seems like the new ideas just keep coming and coming, and lately they've been really falling out of the sky. So it's encouraging."

Hexum said in his case, he's been influenced by listening to new music he's come across on various streaming services, where artists are cross-pollinating styles like reggae with dubstep or exploring variations on drum-and-bass music and reggae rapping.

"I love the streaming services, both Apple Music and Spotify," Hexum said. "I have huge playlists, and I can also use things like Pandora to find new artists in that genre. Where a few years ago, I was more like looking back to like the Meters and P-funk, now lately it's just been really new stuff. That's the great thing about music is it's a never-ending journey."

311 started its musical journey together in 1992 in Omaha, Nebraska. The group enjoyed a gradual build in popularity as it released early rap-rock oriented albums like "Music" (1993) and "Grassroots" (1994). Then came a first breakthrough with the 1995 self-titled CD (also known as The Blue Album), which featured the number one modern rock single, "Down," and a top five modern rock hit, "All Mixed Up."

Another hit, "Come Original," arrived in 1999 on the group's fifth album, "Soundsystem," and the group's career hit another peak in 2003 when its seventh album, "Evolver," produced two more hit singles, "Creatures (For A While)" and "Love Song," the latter being a cover of a song by the Cure. Four more studio

albums have arrived since then, and last year, 311 put out a 4-disc box set, "Archive," featuring outtakes and demos from its 25 years of recording sessions.

Hexum compared the in-progress next album to the 1995 "Blue Album" in the way it blends styles.

"The 'Blue Album' had a good amount of reggae mixed with hip-hop," he said. "A song like 'All Mixed Up' is a dancehall reggae song, but it's got a hip-hop beat, but reggae singing. I would say (there's) more of those kind of cross-genre things that combine the latest in what's going on in Jamaica and the electronic world and then with familiar (styles)."

It sounds like Hexum and his bandmates will try to spend whatever time they have available on the tour working on new material. But Hexum is also looking forward to the shows on the Unity tour, which figure to feature varied set lists from show to show.

"What's cool is we just kind of go wherever the group conscious leads us," he said of 311's concerts. "So we'll have the set list meeting after sound check every day. Maybe we'll dig into 'Archive.' Maybe we'll want to play old rockers. We did debut a couple of new songs at 311 Day, called 'Hey Yo' and 'Island Sun,' so who knows when we will bust those out now and then. But it's fun to have the freedom to not need to play a certain album when we're on kind of like an off cycle year like this. It was probably like 15 years ago now that we said 'You know what, we are primarily a live band. So we're just going to go tour every summer and work the albums around that.'"