

PULSE!

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AUGUST 1997

LATIN MUSIC:

CUBAN INVASION, ROCK EN ESPAÑOL,
TANGO, LUIS ENRIQUE, NYDIA ROJAS

RIDDIMS FROM THE HEARTLAND

311

World Party

Sleater-Kinney

Taj Mahal

Old 97s

BREAKING NEW ARTISTS

How record labels get behind tomorrow's stars

DIRECTOR TOM DICILLO

SA perks right up when *Rule of the Bone* is mentioned, his dark eyes displaying a sudden keen interest. Yes, 311's rapper/scratcher/vocalist says, he's read the 1995 Russell Banks novel. "That's a *great, great* book," he gushes. Around primary frontman Nicholas Hexum's dining room table, SA's bandmates issue somewhat more reserved status reports: "Read it, too." "My girlfriend read it, so I read it through her." "Have it; need to read it." Timothy J. Mahoney, however, professes unfamiliarity. "Is it a true story?" the blue-eyed guitarist asks guilelessly.

It isn't, so a thumbnail plot is outlined for him. Something of a '90s updating of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it's about a homeless mall rat who journeys from his home in upstate New York to Jamaica in the company of a wise and benevolent Rastafarian elder known as I-Man. The teen, who calls himself Bone, gets mixed up with a host of rogues, witnesses a considerable measure of mayhem, smokes a small mountain of ganja and explores Rasta culture, taking his "first baby steps along the path of truth and righteousness" along the way. Through it all, however, Bone remains a pale-skinned outsider feeling his way through a mystical and ultimately unfathomable world.

"The part at the end, where he's going on that trip—Bone is—to the wilds of Jamaica! The way [Banks] wrote it! Yeah, I-Man is always saying, 'Up to you.'"

SA smiles with admiration. "Up to you," he repeats.

And so it is up to 311. The five-man hybrid band from Omaha, Neb., set off on its own mission of discovery in 1990, winning over hometown fans with high-energy shows and a trio of self-distributed albums. Since then, the quintet—Hexum, Mahoney, SA (*né* Doug Martinez), bassist P-Nut (*né* Aaron Wills) and drummer Chad Sexton—has resettled in Los Angeles, signed with Capricorn Records, and issued three albums leading up to its fourth and latest, *Transistor*. Along the way, it's developed into a self-contained unit that's tight on stage and off. Scott Ralston, the band's 29-year-old live sound engineer, was promoted to producer

Punk-reggae

hybrid quintet

311

discovered

Trenchtown Rock

in Omaha, Neb.,

then relocated to

Babylon, Los

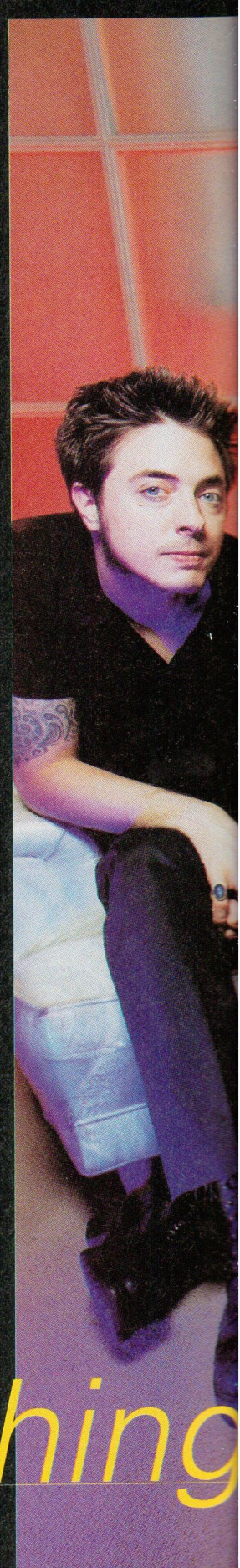
Angeles. Now it's

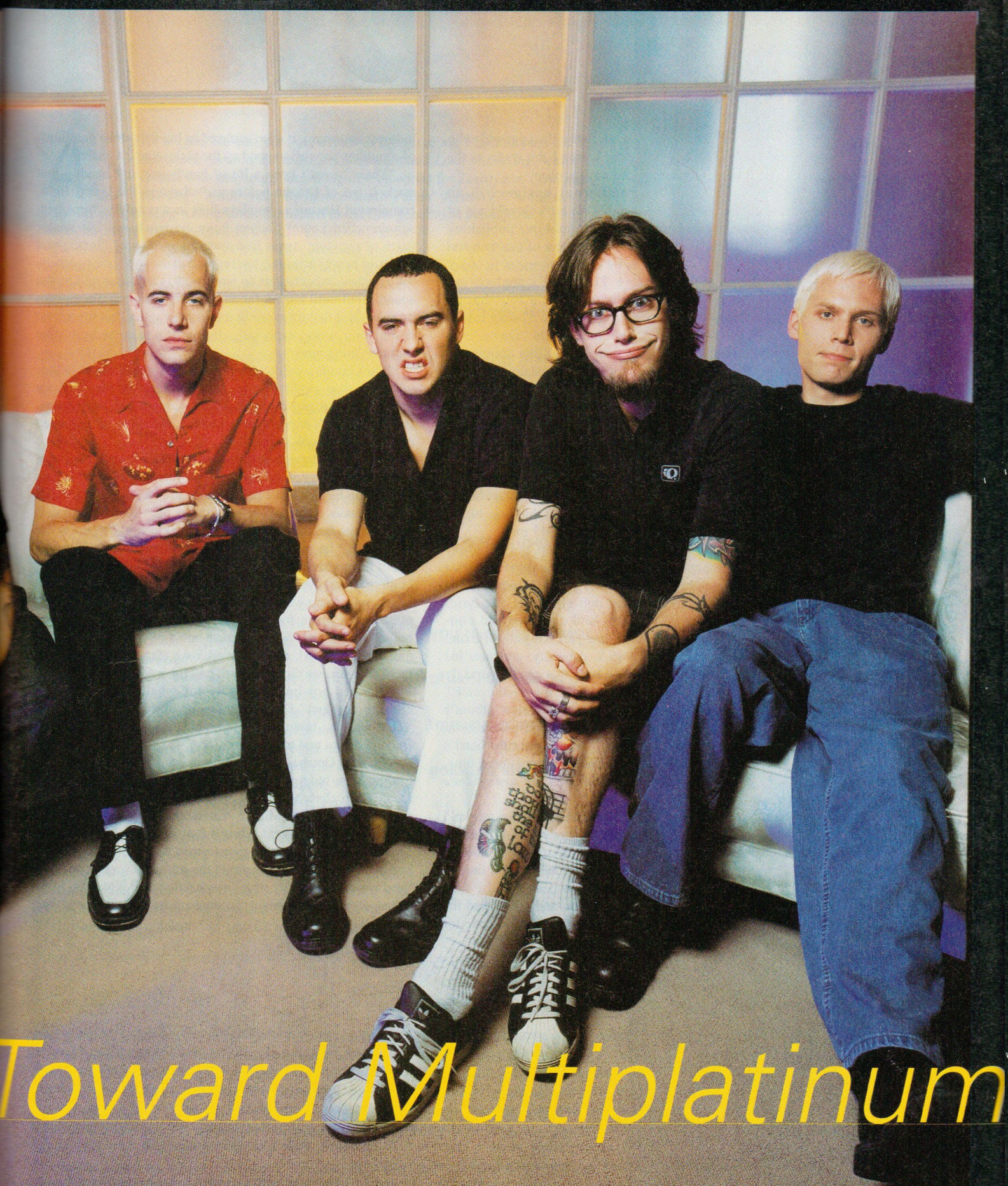
on the brink of

hugeness

Slouching

By Steven Stolder





Toward Multiplatinum

with the new album. Adam Raspler, the 26-year-old who oversees 311's business interests, learned the trade at the band's side, having never managed anyone else.

"We've really tried to handle our business in an unorthodox style," Raspler explains. "We haven't sold any of our merchandising rights. We haven't sold our publishing rights. We're trying to really create a business of our own and maintain control of it as much as we can."

In retrospect, a wise strategy. *Transistor's* predecessor, 1995's *311*, transformed the band from a tour-happy ensemble with modest CD sales to arena stars. Thanks in part to the MTV- and rock-radio-embraced single "Down," the self-titled album has sold more than 2¼ million copies and has generated lofty expectations for the next installment.

Notorious for its genre-busting bent (this is, after all, the only outfit on the planet that has shared bills with Fugazi, KISS and Cypress Hill—or would want to), 311 was welcomed warmly last year by skate-punkers who bought tickets for the Warped tour package and by Jerry's Kids when H.O.R.D.E. brought its neo-Dead vibe to town. What kind of music does it play? It'd probably be easier to list what it *doesn't* play, but, to tackle the initial query: metal, punk, jazz, funk, hip-hop, hippie rock and, of course, reggae all factor into the 311 mix.

Indeed, while *Transistor* is all over the map, it's fair to say it makes frequent pilgrimages to a place in the mind that rests in the West Indies. Nearly two-thirds of its 21 songs draw from reggae and its dancehall and dub offspring. The lyrics are infused with a kind of corn- and cannabis-fed consciousness that's one-part Omaha, one-part Kingston. Hexum provides most of the wordplay (SA, naturally, concocts his own raps), and he has a way with a lyric that can be jarringly artless ("I try to be not like that/ Some people really suck," goes a particularly ungainly couplet from the new album's "Beautiful Disaster"), but also disarmingly plainspoken, as in another *Transistor* tune, "Electricity," where, after the band's relentless stay-positive message is spelled out one more time, Hexum inquires: "What do you think we've been saying since we first started playing?"

When the band first started playing, Hexum, Sexton, and Mahoney composed the lineup, with Mahoney leaving the fold and another guitarist taking over when the trio (then dubbed Unity) set off for Los Angeles. After floundering for a time in Southern California, it returned home sans deal, added P-Nut, put Mahoney back in the lead guitar slot, and completed the circle with SA. Refashioned as 311 (after local police code for

indecent exposure), it soon surfaced as big fish in the one-third-of-a-million-population pond on the plains that is Omaha.

"There haven't been a lot of bands—or any bands—that made it out of Omaha before us," observes the lanky, light-complected Hexum as he plays host in a tastefully furnished, sun-drenched Laurel Canyon home he purchased last winter (each of his compatriots live mere minutes away, Sexton and P-Nut in newly acquired houses within view of one another). "We had no expectations to work with; there was no Omaha sound at all until us. As far as listening to music, there were no rules. Not that there are living in other cities, but there's no dominating scene, especially, living in a mid-sized city like that. Anything goes."

"Punk bands would come through and play a bingo hall or whatever they could—some crappy, run-down place. There were bands coming through. There was a small punk scene. People wouldn't expect that in Omaha, but every decent-sized city has some [punk scene]."

As Hexum departs to escort his two rambunctious pups, Emily and Jake, "off to see nature," P-Nut, elaborate tattoos running up his arm until they disappear under a GET BAKED T-shirt, takes over as tour guide: "In the '80s, when bands would come through, they'd play at the Howard Street Tavern downtown," he recollects, loading a healthy bud he's pulled out of his pocket into a bong that stands as high as a strapping kindergartner. "And then it became more the Ranch Bowl, which was where we were playing. It had a room for a band to play, and a place for everyone to drink. They had lots of pinball, which was where I spent most of my time. It was a nice place to bowl, especially after we started playing shows there, because we didn't have to pay for it anymore."

"We had bowling, billiards, volleyball, a radio station, club, three bars," Hexum recites as he returns to his seat. "That was the town's entertainment. And there were chain [record] stores and indie stores, too."

Ah, yes. Omaha may not have been a hub for the hippest touring acts, but you could find (or order, points out former record-shop clerk Mahoney) pretty much anything that piqued your interest. These Middle Americans devoured everything from the Clash (*London Calling* was an epiphany for Hexum) to Frank Zappa (Sexton was transformed by *Joe's Garage*). For kids who were slain by music in the mid-'80s (everyone in the band was born in 1970, with the exception of P-Nut, who's four years younger than the others), anything went. Punk, metal, rap, what did it matter?

Capricorn Records, then and now

Let it not be said that Phil Walden hasn't learned from his mistakes. He's learned from his achievements, too. In truth, the 57-year-old president and founder of Capricorn Records has done more than his share of learning over the last three decades.

Walden was the toast of the music industry in the first part of the '70s when the then Macon, Georgia-based Capricorn label was home to the Allman Brothers Band, the Marshall Tucker Band, the Dixie Dregs, and a slew of other mostly Southern-bred boogie-rockers. Walden's influence transcended the music industry; when fellow Georgian Jimmy Carter made a long-shot run for the White House in 1976, Walden put together a series of well-timed benefit concerts that helped keep the Carter campaign afloat. The starmaker/kingmaker's empire came crashing down in 1979, however, when an overextended Capricorn was forced into Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings; the label's catalog was absorbed by Polydor Records.

The '80s found the former manager (and close friend) of soul legend Otis Redding wallowing in booze and drugs as he exhausted his wealth and goodwill. Finally, in 1987, he got clean and sober and set about putting his affairs back in order. By 1991, he'd come full circle, reviving the Capricorn imprint through Warner Bros. Records and surveying the South for start-up



AS for reggae, Hexum, for one, comes to the genre via Clash albums like the dub-laden *Sandinista!* and the aforementioned *London Calling*, which he credits with providing something of a blueprint for *Transistor*. (The group covered "White Man in Hammersmith Palais" from 1977's classic *The Clash* for an upcoming tribute album dedicated to the first-generation punks.) They come to Jamaican music from a rock perspective. Unapologetic popularizers, they interpret deep-roots riddims for, in Hexum's words, "suburban kids who have similar backgrounds to us" in somewhat the same manner No Doubt translates ska for MTV viewers.

"A lot of people who get into our albums won't know what dub is, but will be listening to it and enjoying it," argues Hexum. "Then, maybe later, they'll figure out, 'Well, this is what makes it dub: these echoes and this sort of breakdown.' It's good to feel like we're educating people on something rather than just retreading the same rehashed rock formula."

Does the group feel at all awkward about adopting a sound that comes with its own deeply held cultural and spiritual ethos? "I love the music, so I think it's all right to express your love," responds SA. "There's nothing wrong with that, in my opinion."

"Right," echoes Mahoney. "I mean, where did the music come from? It had to come from some other music that they were listening to."

"People think that reggae is more of an ethnic music, but rock'n'roll started as a black-music form," continues Hexum. "The first music was probably made in Africa, so everyone is picking up the torch and taking it to where they see fit, and it always comes from somewhere."

"Look at comedy," reasons P-Nut, slipping off his shades and replacing them with a pair of black-rim glasses. "Everybody steals everybody else's jokes, or they steal a certain style. You can't help it. If you listen to music, or if you're a comedian, you're going to hear other comedians or musicians, and it's going to affect you directly or indirectly."

"Direct!" he decides upon reconsideration. "There's no indirect about it! We listen to a lot of reggae, and we play a lot of reggae."

While P-Nut is making his point, Mahoney lets off a series of raspy coughs and pushes aside the momentarily offending bong. Which brings up an aspect of Rasta culture these guys embrace, no bones about it. The group contributed a track to *Hempilation* (Capricorn), a benefit album for the National Organization for the Reform of

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talents like Widespread Panic and Col. Bruce Hampton and the Aquarium Rescue Unit.

The reborn Capricorn—which subsequently left Warners and went through indie distributor RED for a time before linking with Mercury/PolyGram last year—is now home to 311, Cake, the Freddy Jones Band, the Ian Moore Band, Syd Straw, Col. Bruce Hampton (sans the Rescue Unit), Widespread Panic, Govt. Mule and a handful of newcomers. Capricorn is also starting to rerelease certain catalog titles from the '70s—access granted as part of its PolyGram deal.

Walden insists there really isn't much of a connection between the artists he worked with in the '70s and those he signs now, other than he personally likes them and they're willing to tour incessantly. "I try to sign each band for what they are," Walden draws, "not because of some musical connection with what Capricorn was." —STEVEN STOLDER

311 desert island discs

Chad Sexton, drummer

Its About Luv EP—H.R. (SST).

Live! (Live at the Lyceum)—Bob Marley and the Wailers (Tuff Gong/Island).

Quickness—Bad Brains (Caroline).

Bernstein: Chichester Palms (various labels).

Jaco Pastorius—Jaco Pastorius (Epic).

Nick Hexum, vocalist/guitarist

Buhloone Mindstate—De La Soul (Tommy Boy).

Natty Dread—Bob Marley and the Wailers (Tuff Gong/Island).

The Complete Decca Recordings—Billie Holiday (Decca Jazz/GRP).

Betty—Helmet (Interscope).

God of Love—Bad Brains (Maverick/Warner Bros).

Milo Goes to College—Descendents (SST).

Swingin' at Capitol—Nat King Cole (Capitol).

Check Your Head—Beastie Boys (Grand Royal/Capitol).

P-Nut, bassist

Raindogs—Tom Waits (Island).

God Ween Satan—Ween (Twin/Tone).

Inhaler—Tad (Medicine).

People Get Ready: The Curtis Mayfield Story—Curtis Mayfield (Rhino).

Teenager of the Year—Frank Black (Elektra).

Tim Mahoney, guitarist

Live—Jerry Garcia Band (Arista).

Lotus—Santana (Columbia).

Kaya—Bob Marley and the Wailers (Tuff Gong/Island).

Friday Night in San Francisco—Al DiMeola/John McLaughlin/Paco DeLucia (Columbia).

Rockers soundtrack—Various artists (Mango).

A Picture of Nectar—Phish (Elektra).

SA, vocalist/scratchist

Propmaster Dancehall Show—DJ Red Alert (Epic).

Cymande—Cymande (Janus).

Mental Floss for the Globe—Urban Dance Squad (Arista).

Everybody Digs Bill Evans—Bill Evans Trio (Riverside/Original Jazz Classics).

Heart of the Congos—The Congos (Blood and Fire).

Open the Gate—Lee "Scratch" Perry and Friends (Trojan).