

Chad Sexton  
enjoys a spot of  
alfresco drumming  
at 311's LA studio.



# LIVE THE MUSIC

From drum corps to Cure covers to seven albums with US genre-benders 311, Chad Sexton is a drummer who walks it like he talks it. We met him in LA to discuss musical diversity and the meaning of 'human energy'...

Interview: Simon Braund Photography: James Cumpsty

**G**iven their relative obscurity outside the United States, you could be forgiven for dismissing 311 as one of those tricky-to-categorise, vaguely alternative, flavour-of-the-month American rock acts that come and go with such regularity these days. In fact, they've been around for over 13 years, in which time they've recorded seven albums and attracted a rabidly devoted fanbase.

Formed in Omaha, Nebraska in 1990, 311 still boast their five original members – self-proclaimed 'friends for life' Nick Hexam (guitar), SA Martinex (lead vocals), Tim Mahoney (guitar), P-Nut (bass) and Chad Sexton (drums). Their close friendship is, they claim, an integral part of the band's commercial and creative success. Emerging as a solid unit from various high school bands, it was an unshakeable conviction that 311 was the most important thing in their lives that welded them together, even after they had all done the sensible thing of going their separate ways to pursue college, careers and dull conformity.

The near-simultaneous epiphany that brought them back to Omaha, determined to give it their all, has made them one of the most tightly-knit bands in the business. And it's a good job they get on so well. 311's other signature characteristic is an astounding range of musical influences that would have ensured a more traditional, ego-infested combo never got past the first rehearsal. As it is they've marshalled those influences into a truly unique sound that owes as much to contemporary rock as it does to rap, reggae, hip-hop, jazz and Latin.

After decamping to Los Angeles in 1991 they signed to Capricorn Records and released their debut album, *Music*, in 1993. Their breakthrough came three years later with *311*, also known as 'the blue album', which sold over three million copies. Since then they have toured extensively and continued to release albums that chart their creative momentum and ever-expanding musical diversity.

*Rhythm* spoke to drummer Chad Sexton at 311's studio in North Hollywood where, despite the distractions of a blissfully hot spring day and the Lear Jets thundering overhead from nearby Burbank airport, the band were at work on their eighth album.

**Rhythm: Take us back to the very beginning and your first run-in with the percussive arts.**

Chad Sexton: "The first time I was ever introduced to the drums was when I was four years old and, out of the blue,

some of my parent's friends gave me a drumset – a Red Sparkle Gretsch. A real drumset! Which was kind of weird because I was four. That set stayed with me until the second grade, which is when I started taking lessons. You're around seven in second grade so that didn't last too long. I was missing my cartoons."

**Did you learn anything useful at that age?**

"It was pretty basic, how to hold the sticks, that kind of thing. But my teacher actually started me reading. I picked it up again when I was 11 or 12 and started taking lessons again. I really took to it, had lessons all through junior high and joined my first drum corps when I was around 13. I did that every summer for five years."

**Tell us about the training you have to do for drum corps.**

"It's a very intense musical competition along the lines of a marching band, but there's only bugles and drums. I watch the stuff they play now and I can't believe it, these 20-year-old kids doing things with their hands that are just impossible. It was such a learning experience for me. Just from the point of view of building chops it's incredible. That's what your whole summer is. You wake up at eight and you're stretching out by nine and by 10 you're drumming, and it goes on 'til eight or nine o'clock at night. It's like a musical boot camp. But the things I learned have stayed with me forever."

**You were still playing kit too. How did you adapt what you learned in drum corps to that?**

"I definitely have a drum corps style to my rock playing, it's basically how I write my beats. I can't really pinpoint what it is, it's just being around that for five years and having it pounded into my brain. Whatever you take in comes out somewhere in a different form. One of the things you learn is precision in playing with an ensemble; with the intricacies of the things you're playing you really learn to listen to the people around you. Myself, Chad Smith, Stephen Perkins and some other guys are actually putting together a drum corps thing with the guy who wrote the arrangements for the movie *Drumline*. I think it's going to air on *The Craig Kilbourne Show*."

**Weren't you in the school concert jazz band as well?**

"I was very excited in seventh grade in junior high because I made the advanced stage band, the jazz band. But when I was around 16 and I was heavily into drum corps I kind of took a break from the drumset. When I finished my last year of drum corps, I came home and thought, 'You know

# CHAD SEXTON

## ESSENTIALS

### Top 5 Tracks

311

'You Wouldn't Believe',  
From *From Chaos* (2001)

311

'Down'  
From *311* (1995)

311

'Prisoner'  
From *Transistor* (1997)

311

'Amber'  
From *From Chaos* (2001)

311

'Evolution'  
From *Soundsystem* (1999)

### Top 5 Albums

**Mahavishnu Orchestra**

*Visions Of The Emerald  
Beyond* (1974)

Drummer: Narada  
Michael Walden

**Buddy Rich**

*Tuff Dude: Live* (1984)  
Drummer: Buddy Rich

**Frank Zappa**

*Joe's Garage: Act 1*  
(1979)  
Drummers: Vinnie Colaiuta

**John McLaughlin**

*The Heart of Things: Live  
in Paris* (2000)  
Drummer:  
Dennis Chambers

**Fishbone**

*Give A Monkey A  
Brain...* (1993)  
Drummer: Fish

### Top 5 Drummers

Dennis Chambers  
Vinnie Colaiuta  
Buddy Rich  
Narada Michael Walden  
Fish

### Did you know that...?

Chad can say all 50 US states in alphabetical order in under 30 seconds: "Alabamaalaskaarizona arkansascaliforniacolorado connecticutdelawareflorida georgiahawaiiidahoiillinoisindianaiowakansaskentucky louisianamainemaryland massachusettsmichiganminnesotamississippimissourimontananebraskan evadanehwampshirenewjerseynewmexiconewyorknorth carolinanorthdakotaohioklahomaoregonpennsylvaniarhodeislandsouth carolinasmouthdakotatennesseetexasutahvermontvirginiawashingtonwestvirginiawisconsinwyoming." (He can, we tested him).

Chad applies a few of his trusty old drum corps rudiments to a rather tasty Orange County kit...



**"We're all part of the capitalist machine but if you go back beyond that, music is all about helping people. It can just be about having a good time. It can be as light as that or it can be as serious as death."**

what? I'm going to get into playing drumset again'. And the first group that got me back into it was the Chick Corea Elektric Band with Dave Weckl. Coming from drum corps and seeing the intricate, precise things he was doing on drumset just gave me a completely renewed interest. I know a lot of people didn't like it, said he was too mechanical, but I just couldn't see that. I still can't see it. I still think he's a great player, a great musician. He got a lot of flak, people saying he had no soul but I think it's unfair to slam him. I was like, 'What? He shouldn't practise?'. I loved those tapes he did where one side was music and drums and the other side was just the music so you could do your own thing. They really helped me improve as a player."

### Did you have much opportunity to play music like that other than just to the Weckl tapes?

"I got into different cover bands, playing with my friends, which was actually really boring for me. At that time we were covering alternative music, bands like the Hoodoo Gurus, The Cure, Guadalcanal Diary – some really old bands."

### Excellent stuff. Why was that boring?

"It just wasn't very challenging so I guess I found it boring. I mean, we did some Elvis Costello stuff which I liked, I love 'Pump It Up'. But out of that we gradually began to do our own material."

### You were at school with Tim and Nick from 311, were you playing with them at the time?

"Yeah, we were in these cover bands together. But it really wasn't our thing which is why we began doing our own stuff and switching it around a little. We were getting into rap music, this was when NWA and Ice Cube were starting to happen. So we got into that and reggae and a lot of the rock that was going."

### It's a big jump from Cure covers to what you do now. Was it a gradual progression?

"All five members of 311 grew up in Omaha, I went to school with two of them and it comes from a combination of things. Firstly, it's how we are with each other. We learned how to get along with each other early on."

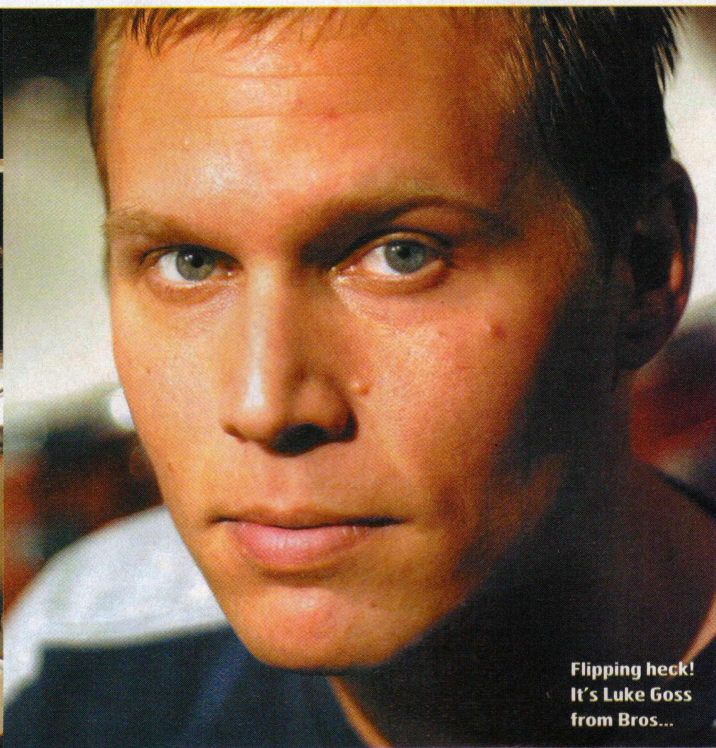
"Number two is that we all love a vast range of music, but we all have peaks in certain areas. Tim's peaks are, like, Carlos Santana or The Grateful Dead; maybe P-Nut's would be more like The Melvins, Monster Magnet, Soundgarden; SA's would be more of the DJ thing, more rap, hip-hop in general and old disco; Nick is more like vocal music, whether that would be Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae, Mel Tormé or even The Beatles; and mine would be, now, a lot of electronica music and, I guess, back in the day, a lot jazz and musician-oriented bands like Frank Zappa and Missing Persons. We have our own peaks but we all love Prince and we all love The Beatles and Bob Marley and it's about our ability to get along and combine the different things we like."

### That's an incredible range of influences to incorporate...

"We just seem to have an ability to work together. We never sat down at a table and said, 'You know guys, the only way we can make this work is to be nice to each other'. It was just the luck of the draw. We're friends, we hung out and partied together and did all these things and in the middle of it we'd suddenly go, 'Hey, I like this song', 'Yeah, I like that too', 'Well, what if we made a rap rock song?', 'Kind of like the Chilis, okay?', 'Or what if we put some reggae in there too?'. And that's where it started."

### Does what you come up with ever surprise you?

"Not really because we're not really conscious of it, we're not careful about it. We're like, 'Throw it against the wall and if it breaks, whatever'. I remember one time SA came up with a rap. I was beatboxing to it, with my mouth,



Flipping heck!  
It's Luke Goss  
from Bros...

**"I got into different cover bands with my friends, which was really boring for me. At that time we were covering alternative music, bands like the Hoodoo Gurus, The Cure, Guadalcanal Diary."**

➤ then I invented notes with the beatboxing, took out the guitar and found those notes. I already had the beat right there. I said, 'That would make a great song, let's put it together'. It turned out to be 'Freak Out'."

**You have an enormous fanbase now, especially in the States. Do you still feel that your responsibilities are more to them than the record company?**

"The record company knows how we work and they appreciate that. But that's not to say they won't listen to this batch of songs and say, 'I don't hear a single'. My reaction to that is, 'Well, I don't care'. I really don't. After we had our big success with the *Blue* album, what music is to us is helping people. We know that and our fans have proved it to us. It might sound very hippyish and clichéd to say that, but if I went to our website and pulled up all the emails from people who are in serious trouble who say we're helping them get through, you'd be amazed. We had one from a mother who has a paraplegic son who doesn't react to anything. We sent him something and he reacted to that, which is incredible. But everyone loses that focus when business is involved. We're all part of the capitalist machine but if you go back way beyond that, that's what music is, helping people. It doesn't have to be that serious, it can just be about having a good time. It can be as light as that or it can be as serious as death. I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen the proof."

**That must also exert its own kind of pressure.**

"I love it, it just gives you a better perspective. We're never like, 'We'd better fix these choruses so it gets air play'. We're like, 'No, this is a piece of creativity that exists for a reason and if you don't understand that, it's your problem'. If they don't think something's a single we'll give them something else. But if they don't think that's a single, what are we going to do, come out sounding like Linkin Park or someone else who has radio hits? There's nothing wrong with having hits, but we can't do that. We want to be unique and stay true to our music."

**What can we expect from the new album?**

"Hardcore 311 fans who I've played some of it to say the drums are much more present and clear. They also say the vocals are more melodic. We've been listening to The Beatles a lot so there's that influence there, but I really don't know what to expect. I know it's distinctively 311, but another step forward."

**Do you think it represents the distance you've come?**

"I think it does, but what's so cool is that we're a band that still has all the original members. It's important because you're making a connection energy-wise whether you know it or not. There's a human energy that's generated that we can't see or hear but the microphones pick it up. We're recording on analogue. Pro-Tools will not pick this up, but analogue does. Pro-Tools, the frequencies go up to 22 and then they stop, done. People say you can't hear above 20,000 cycles because it's too high. It is, but what happens up there is what I call human energy. When we play, I believe the mics are picking up that energy somewhere way up in the register. And that's why I think it's so special that we're still the band we are." ☐



## GEAR

**Drums:** Orange County 22"x22" bass drum, 8", 10", 12", 14", 16" toms, 14"x6" hollow body snare

**Cymbals:** Zildjian 20" Crash Of Doom, Trashformer, 18" K Dark crash, 19" Thin crash, 20" K Custom (unfinished), 10" Oriental splash, 13" A Custom hi-hats and 18" Oriental

**Plus...**

Vic Firth sticks, Remo heads and Pearl hardware

[www.311.com](http://www.311.com)