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Going digital with

311

and their VS-1680's

the art of the remix

Bad Boy Bill

Jason Nevins

Armand Van Helden

Adrian Belew

Jeff Baxter

on the GR-30
Al Di Meola

Victor Wooten

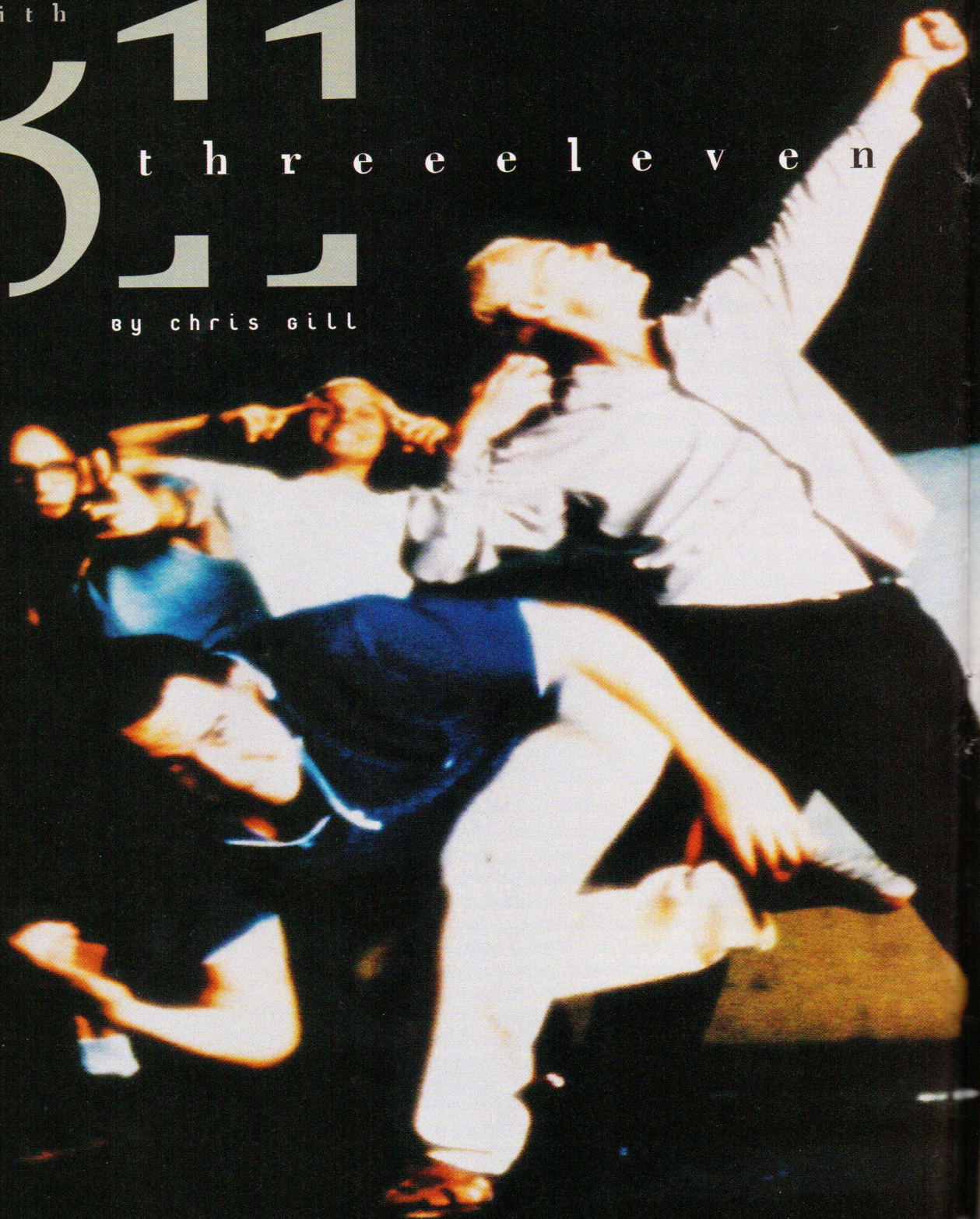
PLUS: Jekyll & Hyde, Scanner, Playing Live with the V-drums and more...

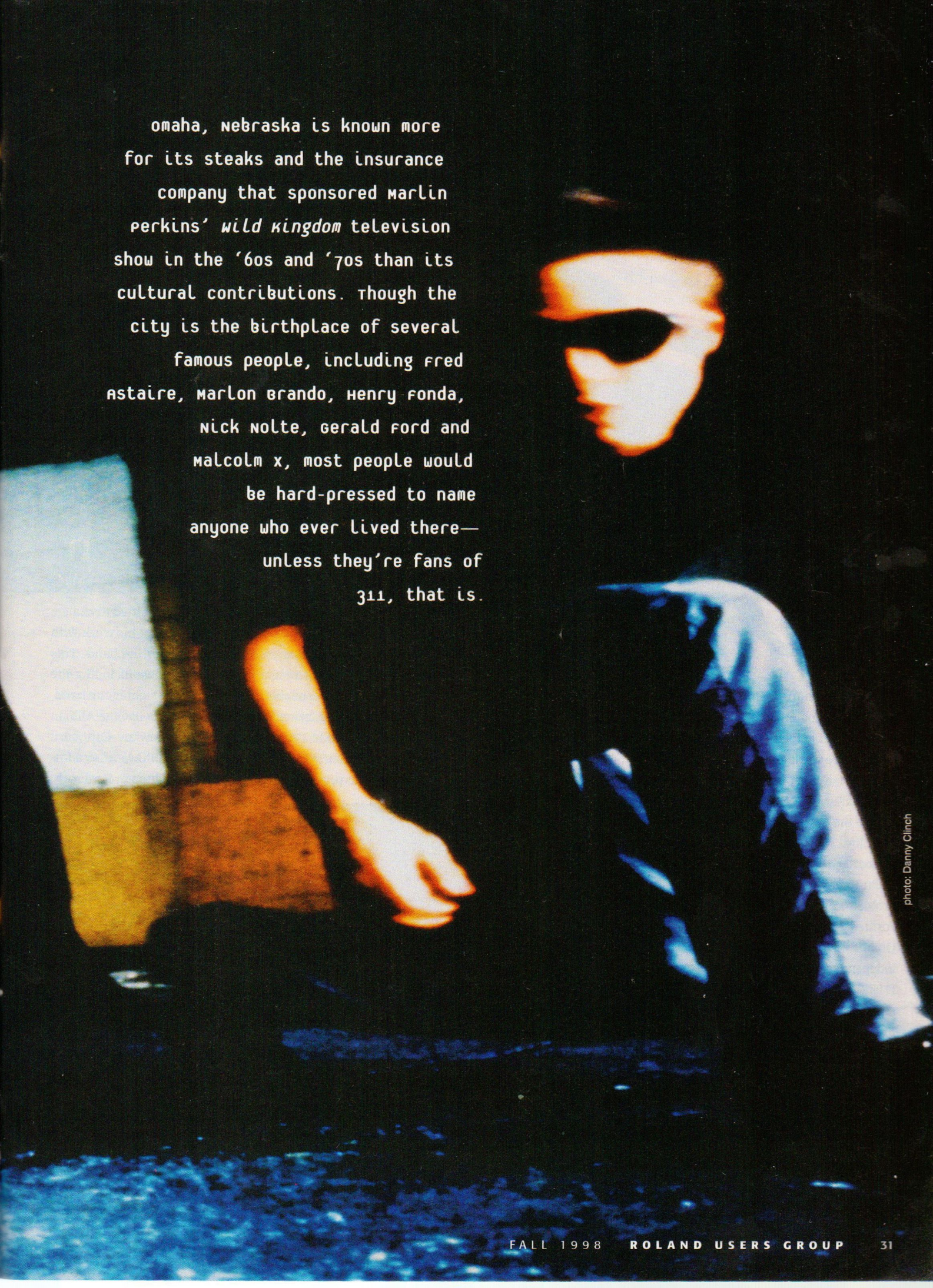
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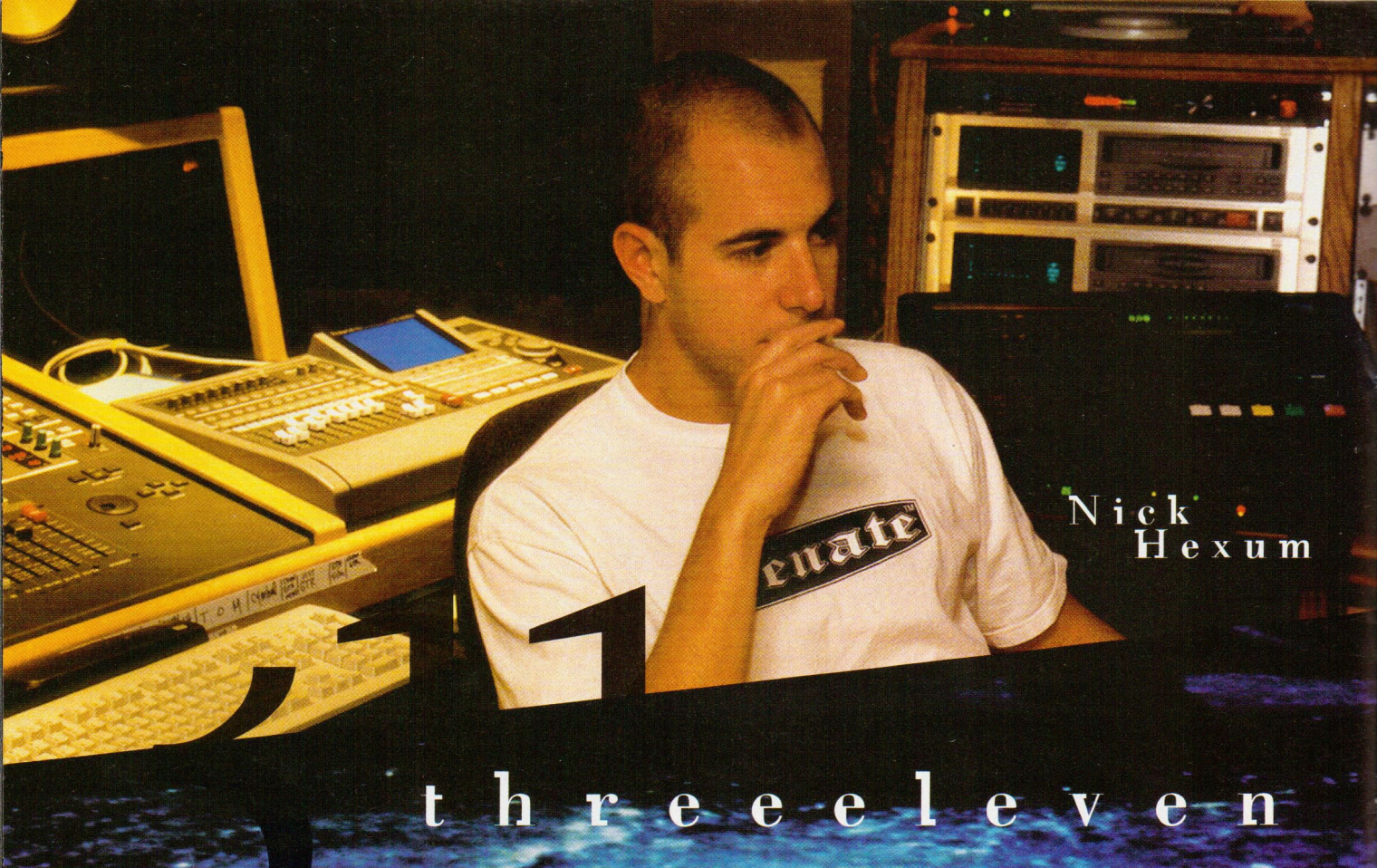
by chris gill





omaha, nebraska is known more
for its steaks and the insurance
company that sponsored marlin
perkins' *wild kingdom* television
show in the '60s and '70s than its
cultural contributions. though the
city is the birthplace of several
famous people, including fred
astaire, marlon brando, henry fonda,
nick nolte, gerald ford and
malcolm x, most people would
be hard-pressed to name
anyone who ever lived there—
unless they're fans of
311, that is.

photo: Danny Clinch



Nick
Hexum

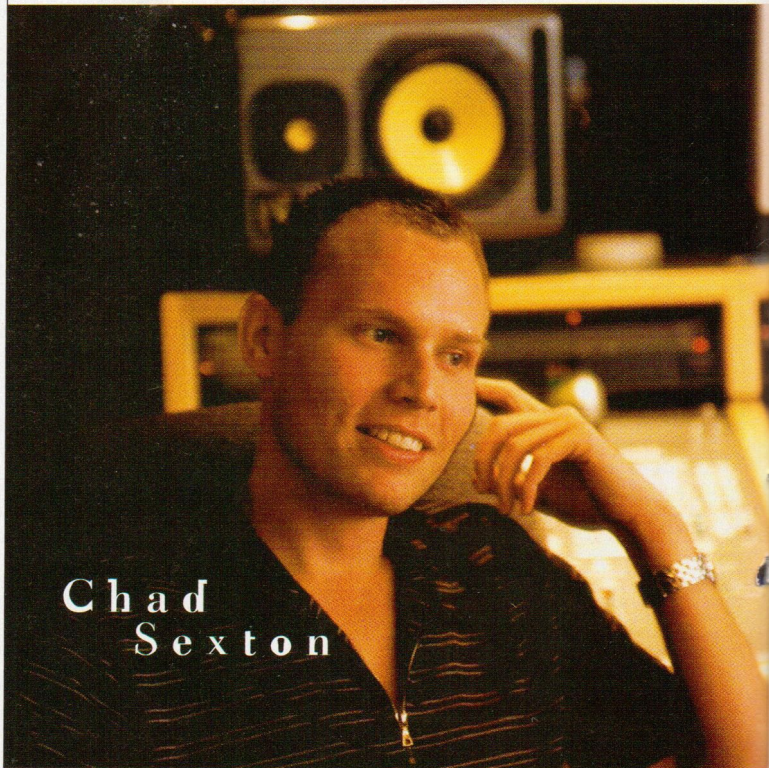
311 t h r e e e l e v e n

Although Omaha isn't exactly a musical mecca like Manhattan, Los Angeles, Nashville, Seattle or Austin, its distinctive environment helped 311 establish a unique identity in the crowded, competitive world of today's rock music business. "We had to work harder than most bands to get where we are," explains 311 vocalist/guitarist Nick Hexum. "But people in the Midwest don't expect to take the easy route. We feel that if you work hard you will have a good life. That work ethic influenced us to stick with our ambitions, no matter what problems came our way."

On the long and twisted path to success, 311 endured numerous problems and mishaps that would have disintegrated lesser bands. Formed in 1990, the band built a strong, dedicated following in Omaha by playing an endless string of gigs and releasing three independent albums, *Dammit!* (1990), *Unity* (1991), and *Hydroponic* (1992). Undergoing several member changes, the band eventually settled into its current lineup—Hexum, lead guitarist Tim Mahoney, drummer Chad Sexton, bassist Aaron "P-Nut" Wills and vocalist/DJ Doug "S.A." Martinez.

Although they had become one of the biggest bands in the Midwest, 311 soon realized that they needed to relocate if they wanted to attract the attention of a major label, so in 1992 they moved to Los Angeles. Unfortunately, that was the year Nirvana and Pearl Jam soared to phenomenal success. Most major label executives were paying more attention to Seattle than they were to anything that was happening in their own backyard.

The band was almost penniless when their luck started to change for the better. Producer Eddy Offord, best known for his work with Yes, took a liking to 311 and produced a demo for the band. This attracted the attention of several record companies, including the newly reformed Capricorn label, which ended up signing the band. Although the label was formerly the home of artists like the Allman Brothers and the Dixie Dregs during its '70s heyday, Capricorn President Phil Walden was looking to re-establish the label as a forward-looking enterprise. With their fresh combination of hard rock,



Chad
Sexton

photos: Jim Hagopian

hip-hop, funk and jazz influences, 311 filled the bill perfectly. With Offord in the producer's chair, the band recorded their first Capricorn effort, *Music*, which came out in 1993.

Although the label released four singles from *Music*, radio virtually ignored the band, so 311 decided to conquer new fans the way they previously had—by winning them over one-by-one through live gigs and word-of-mouth exposure. But halfway through their first tour, tragedy struck when the RV they were traveling in caught on fire and exploded. "The fire destroyed everything we had—all of our equipment, clothes, money and personal possessions," says Hexum. "We still had a lot of shows that we had committed to playing, but had no idea what we were going to do."

Fortunately, the next scheduled show was in Omaha, and with the help of a few friends they borrowed equipment so they could play. The overwhelming support of their fans, friends and family at that homecoming gig recharged the band, and they returned to the road with even more energy and devotion than before.

When it became time to start recording their second effort for Capricorn, 311 decided to take a crack at doing it themselves. Instead of going into the recording studio, they purchased digital multitrack tape recorders and other audio equipment with their advance money and started making the record in the comfort of their living room. "We learned what to do and what not to do when we were making that record," says Hexum. "It was an educational experience. It may not have been the wisest thing for us to do at the time, but it gave us a lot of confidence to know that we could make an album by ourselves."

The band completed *Grassroots* relatively quickly, and shortly after its release in 1994 the band went back on the road. Appearing at the successful H.O.R.D.E. and Warped tours that summer, the band steadily increased its following while retaining its cult status. In silent testimony of the band's underground success, 311 stickers became *de rigueur* skateboard decorations. Eventually, several songs from *Grassroots* received heavy airplay on college radio.

But despite their growing following, 311 was still ignored by mainstream radio and the media, which remained fixated with the gloom of Seattle grunge. Although the band's sound was hard-hitting, the sunny, positive outlook of their lyrics was a stark contrast to the more sober, bleak messages that even their L.A.-based peers, like Rage Against the Machine and Tool, were expressing.

"I always wanted our music to connect with people on a deeper level and have a purpose that transcends entertainment," says Hexum. "I really enjoy getting letters from fans that say things like, 'I just went through a hard time in my life, and your record pulled me through it.' Our lyrics are not 100 percent 'Be Happy.' But when I write a song about a problem there will invariably be a solution or a positive outcome. I guess that's because we're healthy people. We try to be positive and maintain a good attitude. I would really hate it if my influence was not constructive."

To record their third effort for Capricorn, 311 teamed up with Ron Saint Germain—a producer with a more established alternative

pedigree, having previously worked with Tool and Sonic Youth. "We hired Ron because we really liked his work with the Bad Brains," explains Hexum. The Bad Brains, with their unusual hybrid mixture of hard-core punk, reggae and dub, were a huge influence on the band, and they felt that Germain could help them achieve a similar aggressive, genre-blending sound.

The resulting album, *311*, came out in 1995, but once again radio stations were indifferent to the band. That situation changed significantly almost a year later when MTV started screening the video for the band's single, "Down." Soon the song became a runaway hit



Tim
Mahoney

on modern rock radio, and the following singles "All Mixed Up" and "Random" met with similar success. "All of sudden people were talking about our overnight success," says Tim Mahoney. "They didn't realize that it had taken us six years, six albums and thousands of shows to get where we were."

Because of their slow rise to fame, the band managed to keep many of their early fans even as they entered the fraternity of Platinum-selling artists. While many feared that 311 would pander to radio and MTV with their newly established commercial success, the band decided to take a more experimental, ambitious route recording their next album. After spending two months holed up in North Hollywood's state-of-the-art NRG Studios, the band emerged with *Transistor*, a sprawling effort that packed 21 songs and more than 70 minutes of material onto a single CD. While the hard rock and hip-hop influences were still there, *Transistor* exhibited the influence of more psychedelic forms of music like ambient, dub and trip-hop.

"*Transistor* was our creative, experimental phase," says Chad Sexton. "We tried to make a record that was really out there. A lot of

the songs on the album are trippy, 80-beats-per-minute stuff, which is really cool to listen to, but it's hard to dance to. *Transistor* was made to be listened to on a really good system with a subwoofer or over headphones. The full frequency range is represented."

Transistor sold quite well and the ensuing tour established 311 as a top-grossing headlining live act, but many critics remained unmoved by the band's ambition and derided the album with extremely disparaging reviews. "If we weren't coming off of a triple Platinum album then I think that the critics might have been more open-minded," says Hexum. "Instead, they were going, 'I don't see why everyone likes this band.' Most critics were just rushing to judgment, and many of them probably weren't fans of the band to begin with. One of the bad reviews came out so far before the record did that there's no way that the person who reviewed it could have listened to it more than a couple of times. Our music has a long gestation period, and it often takes a while before you start to understand it and like it. 311 was out for more than a year before it blew up. It's now been a year since *Transistor* came out and 'Beautiful Disaster' is just starting to get heavy rotation on radio."

For the follow-up to *Transistor*, the band is applying the long gestation philosophy to their own music for the first time. The band completed their last tour in January, but instead of rushing into the studio to record another album, they decided to slow down the pace a bit and let new ideas and inspirations come to them instead of chasing them down. As a result, the band purchased an old, '70s-era recording studio in Burbank and equipped it with the latest digital recording technology. But instead of hiring someone to run all of these hi-tech toys, the band is taking the time to become proficient on all the gear themselves.

"When we were in the studio before, I always had to ask for everything that I wanted done," explains Hexum. "If I wanted my guitar to sound brighter, I would have to ask someone to do that for me because I didn't know how to operate all the gear. Learning how to



"With 16-bit technology, the low-frequency response isn't quite good enough. But there's an exponential increase in resolution between 16-bit and 24-bit, which results in a significant increase in sonic response. I'm also really impressed by how easy it is to edit things with digital technology. With analog tape, punching in and out is a real hassle. If you make a mistake and punch in too early, which isn't that hard to do, you have to go back a couple of bars to fix things and record over something you've done previously. With digital, you just select your punch-in and punch-out points, and it's a non-destructive process. Now you can spend most of your time getting things to sound the way you want them to instead of fixing mistakes."

"The 1680's make it really easy for us to exchange information and ideas. We all don't have a setup at home like we have at the studio, so the 1680 allows us to communicate in the same format."

- Nick Hexum

operate a huge, automated mixing board is like learning a whole new career. But all of the new digital technology is incredibly user-friendly, so we decided to get completely into the futuristic digital world of hard disk recording with the VS-1680 [24-bit Digital Studio Workstation]. With the setup we have now, I can operate everything myself. I can come down here at eight in the morning with no assistants and run the studio. It's not so confusing anymore.

"Thanks to the increased sampling rates and bit resolution, all the new digital equipment really sounds incredible," Hexum continues.

"We hadn't tried making an all-digital album before," adds Sexton. "Our past two albums were done the old-fashioned way on Neve boards and 2-inch tapes and all that. But we felt that now was the right time to try making an all-digital recording. If we find that we love it, then we'll stay with it. We also felt that it was important to have our own studio for developing songs. We wanted to be able to stay in one place for a year without any pressure. Since we're making demos in the same place and with the same equipment that we're recording the album with, we'll have a much better idea of what the



Chad, Nick and Tim in their new (actually being built as we talked with them) Burbank studio.

final results are going to sound like. There's a big difference between going from the rehearsal studio to the recording studio, mainly because different rooms don't sound the same."

"Before we would do pre-production by rehearsing in our living rooms or in some big, boxy rehearsal space," explains Hexum. "We had no idea about how our songs were going to turn out when we recorded them because of the lousy acoustics and not being able to hear each other's parts because they

the freedom to work on demos at their home studios at their own pace and without any pressure. The band was attracted to the fact that the VS-1680 is fully self-contained, which allows them to freely swap recordings without having to worry about consistency of quality or format incompatibility.

"The 1680's make it really easy for us to exchange information and ideas," says Hexum. "We all don't have a setup at home like we have at the studio, so the 1680 allows us to communicate in the same format. The 1680 is so portable that I'll probably be taking it with me when we go out on tour again. I'm really into bringing my studio on the road with me so I can stay creative while I'm waiting for show time to come around each day. It's a constructive way to use my time rather than pursuing the temptations of the various vices that are around us on the road."

"The 1680's sound quality is actually good enough for professional applications," notes Mahoney. "I don't know of any other all-in-one studio that offers that kind of performance. It gives us the option to use material that we recorded for our demos, letting us keep that vibe that got us inspired in the first place, instead of trying to recreate it."

"And you can use it to record anything you like, any time you like and almost anywhere you like," adds Sexton. "As long as you put a good sound into it, you'll get a great sound out of it. With just a pair of speakers, a guitar, a drum machine and a synth you can make professional-sounding demos."

"We want to have everyone contribute to all of the songs this time," says Hexum. "Before, everyone would bring in finished songs with all the parts already written. It didn't allow for as much collaboration. Since we all have VS-1680's now, we can swap ideas by exchanging disks with each other. I may come up with a chorus and then someone else will come up with the verse. When you have a chemistry like we do, more communication leads to new ideas. The more voices that give input, the better it's going to turn out."

In addition to using their VS-1680's for recording song demos and

"It's perfect for recording bass parts or guitar solos. Having a 1680 in there allows us to track solos that we'll actually use on the album while we're working on vocals or drum parts in the main studio."

- Chad Sexton

weren't mic'd. Now our pre-production demos are going to be album-quality. We can concentrate on taking our music one step further ahead when we go into production instead of just starting the whole process over. That will give us a lot more flexibility to experiment and work with our music more closely."

Having made the decision to plunge fully into the digital domain, 311 recently purchased six Roland VS-1680's, effects cards and CD Recording Systems—one for each band-member and one for their producer as well. The main motivation for this was to give everyone

swapping ideas, the band has also installed a unit in the room next to the main studio, turning it into an auxiliary studio. "The room is too small for recording drums," explains Sexton, "but it's perfect for recording bass parts or guitar solos. Having a 1680 in there allows us to track solos that we'll actually use on the album while we're working on vocals or drum parts in the main studio."

A quick glance in the main room of the studio reveals that 311 are fans of more Roland equipment than just the VS-1680. Hexum has a DJ-70 Sampling Workstation in his keyboard rig, along with a

JV-1080 64-Voice Synthesizer Module. "I've loaded all of the 1080's expansion card slots," says Hexum, "which gives me access to thousands of Patches. That's really helpful when I'm looking for inspiration. I've got every hip-hop drum sound you could imagine, drum loops and scratch sounds. I really like the 'Bass & Drums' card, especially the samples done by Abe Laboriel Sr. and Jr."

Hexum and Mahoney both use Roland GR-30 Guitar Synthesizers as well. "The GR-30 is such a cool thing to have," says Mahoney. "It's great to be able to play organ parts on guitar. I have an XP-50 [Music Workstation], too, but I can't really play keyboards."



"Tim played a lead solo on his guitar synth on a song we recorded that was released as a b-side on a single from our last record," adds Hexum. "I mainly use my guitar synth live. On the last tour I used it on five songs for a blend between a sitar sound and a guitar sound. It's kind of surf-like, but more trippy because it has that sitar blended in. I also used some synth lead and organ sounds. It gives the guitar a new voice, and it's a very useful tool."

The band are also huge fans of BOSS effects, particularly the SE-70 Super Effects Processor. "That's the coolest multi-effects unit," says Mahoney.

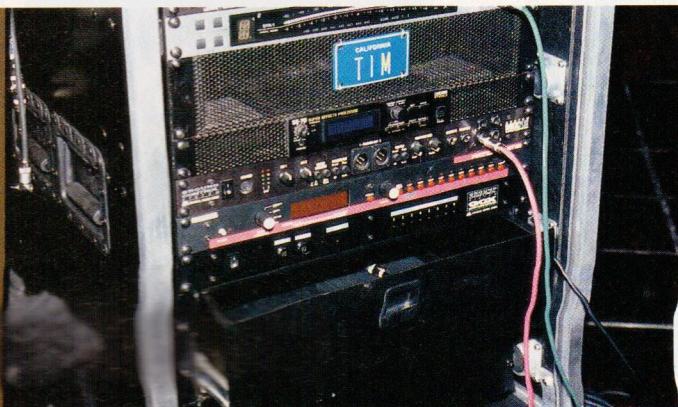
"Those pedals are a big part of the 311 sound. My BOSS OC-2 Octave pedal is one of the first things I ever got when I lived in Omaha."

- Tim Mahoney

"That piece was the bomb," agrees Hexum. "It gave you so much for so little money."

"The SE-70's T-Wah preset is something that most multi-effects don't have," continues Mahoney. "And the BOSS T-Wah [TW-1] pedal was the coolest, too. I also like the FT-2 Dynamic Filter pedal. Every now and then I'll find one of those pedals somewhere, and I'll have to buy it. Those pedals are a big part of the 311 sound. My BOSS OC-2 Octave pedal is one of the first things I ever got when I lived in Omaha. That thing's great. If there's one effect that we all love for the guitar, it's the Octave pedal."

Although the band has yet to record a single note of material for their upcoming album, Hexum already has a strong idea of what direction the band is heading in. "Lately I've been listening to a lot of rock, punk and heavier, more raw, stripped-down stuff," he says. "My writing so far has been hard-edged riffs and more up-tempo stuff based around two guitars, bass, drums and vocals. I recently burned a rock mix CD with songs from the Def Tones, Bad Brains, Helmet and Pantera, and I've been drawing inspiration from listening to that. I'm really into trying to re-create that energy I felt when I started going to shows. The first time I ever moshed was at a Verbal Assault



Tim Mahoney's rack. Who says SE-70's aren't rack mountable?

and SNFU gig at a dirty, old bingo parlor in Omaha around 1985. It seemed like I slammed for hours, and I became instant best friends with other punks I had never met before. The experience changed my life."

The band has several other projects to keep them occupied while they're exploring their more aggressive musical tendencies. First up is a compilation of remixed and remastered material from 311's first three independent, pre-Capricorn releases. Tentatively titled *The*

Omaha Sessions, the album will feature the songs "Damn," "Down South," "Right Now," "Rollin'," "Slinky," "Soulsucker," "Summer of Love," "This Too Shall Pass," and "Today My Love." The band hopes to have the album available by September.

"Those albums have been bootlegged extensively," says Hexum. "I hate to see our fans paying \$50 for lousy-sounding bootleg CD's that were copied off of cassettes. We decided to choose the best material from all three of those albums, remaster and, in some cases, remix the songs, and put it all out on one \$15 CD. It's not going to be sold in stores, though. You can only get it

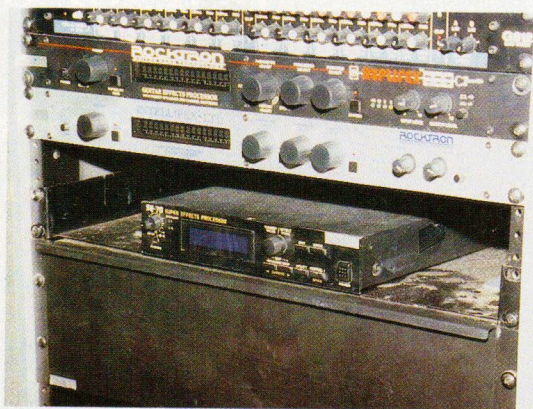
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through our Website [www.311music.com] or by mail-order from our fan club. Our fans have been waiting a long time for us make that material available again."

Hexum is also taking some time off to produce an album by his brother, Zack. Fans expecting a 311 knock-off will be surprised to find out that the record is a straight-forward, instrumental jazz effort. "Zack is an amazing sax player and multi-instrumentalist," says Hexum. "Chad helped us out, too. A lot of people don't know that Chad and I used to have a jazz band when we were in high school. At the same time, Tim and I had an alternative-type band that

work with them on their new album, either.

"I think it's cool to collaborate with other musicians," says Hexum. "We had percussionist Eric Bobo of Cypress Hill, who is Willie Bobo's son, jam with us on three songs on *Transistor*. That was a lot of fun. I'd like to get some of these incredible Jamaican vocalists to sing with us, like Frankie Paul, who has the most beautiful crooning voice in the world. I'd also like to get Ernest Ranglin, who I think is the greatest reggae guitarist of all time, to record with us. Instead of paying \$2,000 to get clearance on some sample, I'd rather pay him the money to have him play with us."



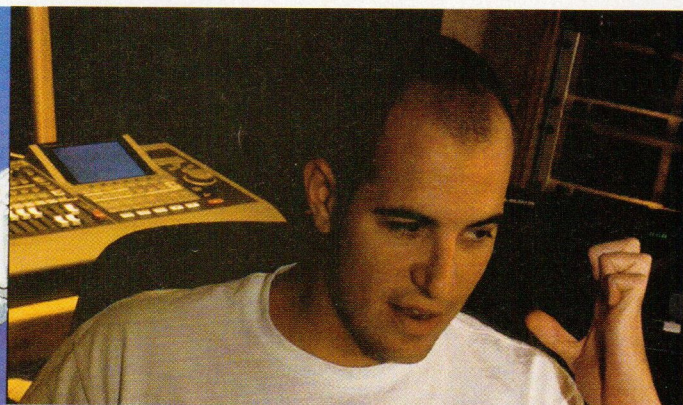
Nick Hexum's rack with his SE-70.

played things like the Cure, the Smiths and R.E.M., as well as original songs. We're from a pretty wide base."

The project that most of 311's fans will be excited to hear about is an upcoming live album, scheduled to be released this November. The band is currently going over material recorded at ten shows between 1995 and 1997, picking out the best performances and narrowing down the final choice of songs. The band's recording and live sound engineer, Scotch Ralston, is also assisting with the selection and mixing.

"Scotch has worked with us since day one when we arrived in L.A.," says Hexum. "Now he works as both our engineer and producer. We have a lot in common. He's a Midwestern boy like ourselves, and he has similar tastes in music. It's such a safety net for us to have him around. He knows how to dial in our sounds better than anyone else. He can get Chad's big drum sound in a matter of minutes. He's just starting to get into the digital domain. I've been bugging him to get into it for a while. He now knows how to use the 1680 quite well."

Although the band are friends with several other Southern California bands, like No Doubt, Korn, the Def Tones, the Urge, Pennywise and NOFX, they don't have any plans to make guest appearances on any of their neighbors' records just yet. The band is busy enough with their own work. However, Nick did manage to slip in enough time to play guitar on a new song being recorded by his long-time idol, Joe Strummer of the Clash. And the band isn't entirely ruling out the possibility of bringing in other musicians to



A big part of 311's appeal is that they haven't forgotten how it feels to come across new styles of music and share their discoveries with their friends. For them, the practice of making music is a never-ending learning process. The band has progressed remarkably since making their debut in Omaha, and, even though they've found the success they were once striving for, they're not content to rest on their laurels.

"Every time we make a record, we learn something new about ourselves," says Hexum. "We may start off in one direction, but by the time we're finished we could be in an entirely different state of mind. And six months after the album is done, our opinion about our work may have changed drastically."

"What happens is we begin to see not necessarily faults, but where we would like to be," explains Sexton. "We try to do very ambitious things musically, like combining styles of music that may not have been combined before. If we hear something that blows us away, it really inspires us. We hope that our music will have a similar effect on other musicians. It's really healthy if we can inspire each other to grow."

Chris Gill is a musician, recording engineer and freelance writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. His articles have appeared internationally in publications including Guitar World, Guitar Player, Musician and Player magazines. Chris is also the author of Guitar Legends (Harper Collins). He is currently working on several remix projects at his all-digital home studio, which is well-stocked with vintage and new Roland equipment.