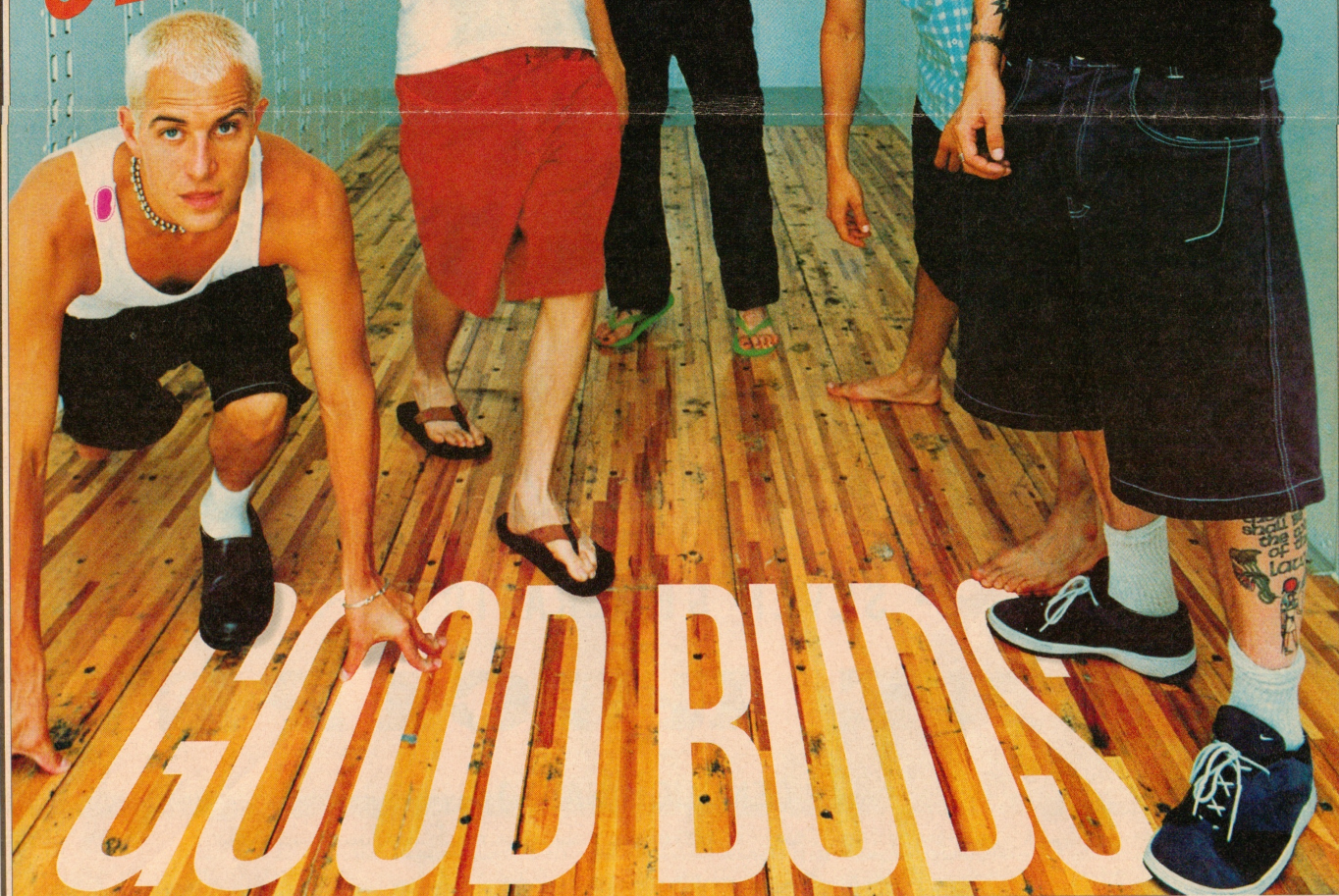


# ROCK & ROLL

On the road with  
the weed-lovin',  
good-timin',  
record-sellin'

311





## By Jon Wiederhorn

**T**HE DOOR OF THEIR LUXURY BUS CLOSES, AND 311 SHUTTLE off on the 12-hour overnight drive from Los Angeles to Park City, Utah, where they will perform their second U.S. show in support of their new album, *Transistor*. Not two minutes after the journey begins, bassist P-Nut (a.k.a. Aaron Wills) pulls out a rainbow-colored bong and a large zip-lock bag that is swelling with more than an ounce of strong marijuana buds, and proceeds to pack himself a bowl.

Moments later, guitarist Tim Mahoney, 27, uncovers a second stash, this one in a jar embossed THC. For the next half-hour, the bong is lovingly passed among band members, and when they're not tok-

ing, P-Nut and Mahoney grip their containers of weed like infants clutching teddy bears.

The only ones who don't smoke are the group's two vocalists. Frontman Nick Hexum likes to wake and bake at home but doesn't partake much on the road, and rapper Doug "SA" Martinez, 26, doesn't smoke at all anymore, although you'd never know it from his obsession with UFOs.

Between hits, P-Nut, so named because of the shape of his head, recounts events from his busy day: First he met his foxy girlfriend at a head shop and bought the aforementioned bong. Then he purchased a new laptop computer so while 311 are on the road. Oh, yeah, he also put a \$15,000 lien on his home mortgage in order to bail his friend's assistant out of jail — it seems that they were busted with more than 4,000 potted marijuana plants.

"I'm just happy I got to help out, even though I don't know the [assistant]," reasons P-Nut. "Knowing that he was in jail for no reason besides the law made it worth the hassle."

As P-Nut, 23, relates the story, Hexum, 27, and SA nod appreciatively and sip cans of Guinness, while Mahoney gradually slides down a couch cushion, his face cemented into a goofy grin. "We like to smoke, but we're not endorsing marijuana," says the soft-spoken Hexum after three of his band mates have fallen into deep slumber. "We're saying, 'If you're gonna party, don't do coke, don't get drunk and smash your car, don't do heroin.' With pot, you could never get real stoned and then go beat your wife,

**"With pot, you could never go beat your wife," reasons Hexum. "It makes you more sensitive."**



**Smoke gets in your eyes: SA, Hexum, Mahoney, Sexton and P-Nut (from left).**

because it doesn't deaden things. It makes you more sensitive."

Considering how much pot the members of 311 smoke, it's surprising that these boys from Omaha, Neb., can all make it to sound check on time, let alone shoot hoops and work out before tonight's gig. But in truth, the bales of herb the band has smoked during its 7-year career may be what has kept it balanced. Sure, 311 may have sold more than 2 million copies of their last album, and *Transistor* may have entered the *Billboard* album chart at No. 4, but the band has also endured fires, deceptive producers, and critical slings and arrows that would have torn apart a more uptight crew.

"We really try to keep a good attitude," says Hexum. "A lot of people say, 'Man, it's such a shitty time to be alive,' but I can't relate to that at all."

Hexum's optimism sparkles throughout *Transistor*. Many of the songs surge with propulsive raps and swaggering metal riffs, but the band never equates heaviness with hostility, and it thinks nothing of abruptly shifting from storming rock to billowing dub in midsong. Unlike 311's last three albums, which were built around a foundation of bru-

ing volume and boundless energy, *Transistor* is an equal balance of noise and nuance. There's less hip-hop and more reggae, and the production is far more spacious, leaving plenty of room for airy vocals and galactic sound effects.

"We wanted to create songs that caress your ears rather than just slap them," says Hexum. "I've always been into the Smiths as much as Bad Brains."

Though occasionally sophomoric, Hexum's lyrics are refreshingly positive, relaying a message of hippie-trippy unity. "When I find myself singing about my problems, I think, 'Well, who am I to complain?'" he says. "Kurt Cobain should have felt that way. I have a big problem with the fact that someone could be given so much yet still see the

a school that was only 30 percent white, and the kids used to sing Sugar Hill Gang's 'Rapper's Delight' on the way to school," he recalls. "That had a profound impact on me. I loved being around all the slang and the culture."

In high school, Hexum dug R.E.M., the Clash and the Beastie Boys, but his horizons were broadened after he picked up Bob Marley's *Legend*. "That record changed my life," he says. "I remember sneaking home from school to smoke weed and listen to [Marley's] *Natty Dred*. The sun was coming through the window, and I blew out the pot, and the sun shone on the smoke. I had this epiphany of the total enjoyment of music."

While in high school, Hexum met Mahoney, and the two formed a cover band called the Eds. At the same time, Hexum was playing guitar in the school jazz band with Chad Sexton, now 27, whose funk drumming propels 311's pulsing groove.

Unlike his band mates, Sexton's childhood was scarred with unpleasantness, the worst of which happened at the age of 7, when he was grazed in the face by a shotgun pellet after a local loony went postal inside a dinner theater. "That was really trippy," remembers Sexton. "My mom told me I slept with the lights on for a week after that."

Sexton, who has always vented his troubles on his kit, joined Hexum in high school. The Eds changed their name to Unity and took on a heavier, white-boy, funk-metal vibe. "I felt like I finally found my niche," says Hexum. "We never considered bullshit like, 'We're from Omaha, so we shouldn't play funk.'"

With their pockets filled with weed and their heads filled with rock & roll dreams, Hexum and Sexton headed for L.A., where they were met with disinterest from the thriving Hollywood hair-metal scene. Discouraged, Hexum started drinking and taking drugs. He figured that if he couldn't relate to L.A. rockers musically, maybe he could vibe with them chemically. In 1989, he started hanging out with homeless metalheads who were high on speed, and he partied with the Dead Boys' Stiv Bators.

"I can't believe I came out of it healthy and disease-free," marvels Hexum. "We'd be out at clubs, having the world's greatest time, but the next day I'd wake up and realize my band wasn't going anywhere and I had just blown all my money. So I decided to straighten out. I haven't touched cocaine or heroin for six years now." That same year, Sexton went back to Omaha, and Hexum moved to Germany.

SA, like Hexum, discovered rap at an early age, when he was bused to a racially mixed school. His first rhymes poked fun at his siblings, and, with a bit of prodding, he lets fly with some dope old-

negative side in everything."

If Hexum's lyrics are contemplative, rapper SA's are more often influenced by science fiction. Throughout *Transistor*, SA waxes prophetic about mysterious civilizations, space aliens and the coming of the millennium. He first became obsessed with the unknown after an out-of-body experience in college. "I wasn't on drugs," he insists. "I was lying in bed, and the next thing I knew, I couldn't move. All of a sudden, I'm hearing this loud buzz inside my head, and then there was a solid blue cord of light that was going berserk. Then I'm just drifting out of my body."

LIKE THE REST OF THE GUYS IN 311, Nick Hexum spent most of his youth in Omaha. His father is a pharmacologist who does experimentation on slaughterhouse tissue, and his mom is a practicing psychologist, but his folks weren't always so academic. In his swinging youth, Hexum's father played trumpet, and his missis was a singing pianist who cut a couple of jazz records. Hexum's first musical revelation came early, when his family was living in the Washington, D.C., area. "I was bused to



school riddims about his sister: "Chris is a bitch, breaking hearts, she don't care/She changes boys more often than I change my underwear."

While attending the University of Nebraska, Sexton and SA hooked up with P-Nut (whose mom now runs the 311 fan club). P-Nut, the youngest and most visually striking member of the band, is obsessed with four things: music, pot, *The Simpsons* and occult figure Aleister Crowley. P-Nut's right shin is decorated with a multicolored rendering of Crowley's motto: Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law. P-Nut got the tattoo only after he turned 18 and received his mom's permission.

Sexton, SA and P-Nut started a band called Fish Hippos and, later, secured a spot opening for Fugazi in Omaha. Upon hearing the news, Hexum rushed back home from Germany and joined the group for the gig, which, coincidentally, was attended by an acid-dazed Mahoney, who eventually replaced one of the band's original guitarists.

In the early '90s, while 311 were struggling to build a following in Omaha, they recorded a demo with Yes producer Eddy Offord. The group secured an album deal, moved to L.A. and started touring with an RV borrowed from Sexton's dad. But after the second

show, the RV caught fire, and the band members barely escaped. "I looked in the rearview mirror, and I just saw orange," says Hexum. "The flames were coming up over the door. We had to jump over them to get out."

The band members lost all their gear, clothes and tour money in the inferno. Regardless, they finished the tour with borrowed instruments and a new RV. But shortly after, the band ran into another career snag. As the group puts it in a prepared statement, "[Offord] had some serious personal problems and health problems during the recording [of *Grassroots*, 311's second album]. He was drinking heavily and had really erratic behavior."

Offord denies this and says that "[311] turned into very selfish people. They're great guys, but I think they started to believe their own press. They were like spoiled kids. And, yeah, I pulled a few stunts on them; I won't deny it, but they deserved it."

Understandably, 311 and Offord parted ways. "First, fate screwed us by burning up our RV; then this guy screwed us, but I never lost faith," says Hexum. "I remember thinking, 'God, this is so great. We have all these fans in Atlanta that can't wait for us to get back. We're gonna make it, man. One day we're gonna go back into the studio and make the most dopest album.'"

It would take two more [Cont. on 62]



## 311

years, but in 1996, 311 released their singsongy hit "Down," and the youth of America duly plunked down their allowances.

Salt Lake City is not exactly a rock & roll Mecca. Yet this evening when 311 play at Wolf Mountain, in Park City, several thousand screaming teens dressed in revealing outfits that would give their parents aneurysms make the pilgrimage to the venue. Few of the fans, if any, leave disappointed. During the show, Hexum sings and riffs away intently while SA staggers across the stage, pinwheeling his arms. At the same time, Mahoney practices vertical leaps, and P-Nut sticks out his pierced tongue and lifts his legs one at a time like an evil leprechaun marionette.

After the encore, two trembling pubescent girls wrangle their way backstage and procure autographs. Everywhere the group goes, adoring girls surround 311. There are others, however, who are less charitable.

To many critics, 311 continue to create a soulless and watered-down hybrid of rock, rap, and reggae. "We get dissed for being lightweight because we're happy," gripes Hexum, relaxing after a post-gig message (just one of the perks of platinum album sales). "But I'm talking about things in my lyrics that are important. Maybe if the great thinkers of past times—like Buddha or Christ—were alive today, people would say they were shallow because they were talking about everything being cool to one another."

Hexum's diatribe is interrupted by an invitation to head back to the bus for some after-show revelry. On board, they watch Mariah Carey's new video "Honey." As the singer swims, Jet Skis, and gyrates, Mahoney blurts out, "Seeing that just makes you want to fuck her. Then you feel really guilty 'cause she's so cheesy." Sexton agrees, but before the band has the chance to get too excited, the "Transistor" video splashes across the tube. The song's syncopated beats, distorted guitars and reggae harmonies permeate the cushy interior of the bus, and Sexton starts to play air drums while Mahoney bobs his head and toasts the screen with his bong.

"Some people say they thought they wanted stardom, but it sucks and it's not all cracked up to be," says Hexum after the video is over. "That's just a bad attitude. If you're doing what you want, you should be happy. And I am." He sighs contently, looks over at a picture of his girlfriend that he has scanned into his laptop computer and smiles. "Stardom is all that I had hoped for—no question."