

MUSIC



The band is known for its high-energy live shows.

FEELS SO GOOD

With a new box-set release, 311 takes stock of impressive legacy and excitable future

By Eric Sandy

KNOWN MOSTLY FOR THE TIP of their sonic iceberg — hits like “Down,” “Amber,” a cover of the Cure’s “Love Song” — 311 quietly built one of the most dynamic American touring acts of the past 20-plus years. To this day, they’re throwing down hyper-intense and idiosyncratic rock shows before sold-out crowds of rabid fans. One could make the case that, as we plow deeper into the summer of 2015, they’ve never sounded better.

Bassist P-Nut spoke with *Scene* from his California home a few days before embarking on the band’s expansive summer tour. Along with bandmates SA Martinez (vocals, samples), Tim Mahoney (guitar), Chad Sexton (drums) and Nick Hexum (vocals, guitar), he remains at the helm of an incredible trip after so many years on the road and in the studio. Save for the summer of 1999, 311 has been tearing up the U.S. and the rest of the known world since the early 1990s.

Just last month, the band released an 81-song boxed set that covers everything from 1992 through 2014. The archival release is something on an order rarely seen from bands these days. The

four discs comprise B-sides (some previously available in various forms online and through special releases, others a bit more rare), unreleased songs (some of which have never before been heard by fans), demos and pre-production recordings.

In particular, the eight *Transistor* sessions songs really stand out. There’s a lot of really great SA material from one of his canonical eras, when he was fronting songs with his spiritual lyrics and dynamic vocal leads (see “The Quickening,” “Everything”). The band once famously dubbed its music “ear candy” in the mid-90s, and this latest release is like the

an aquatic, distorted chorus. It’s vintage ’97 stuff.

That’s one of the really fun things about the archives here. As listeners tour the unreleased songs (on the set’s second disc),

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ultimate box of chocolate.

“Lemming,” as another example, tosses Hexum’s lyrical acrobatics against a choppy guitar riff before launching into

it’s pretty clear which era lays claim to these songs. “Time is Precious,” for instance, is ripped right from the *Evolver* days, sort of blending “Beyond the Grey

Sky” with “Creatures (For a While)”-style guitar effects.

“How many bands get to release 81 songs at all, much less 81 tracks that are rare or unheard? It’s great,” P-Nut says. “The fans have been lifting us up for 25 years now, and this is something that we’re really excited about.”

“With some of the stuff that’s gotten leaked — ‘Earth People,’ which has an awesome bass line — and a couple of other songs, people are going to be like, ‘I can’t believe this wasn’t on an album.’ Now those songs are going to be on an album that they can listen to while they’re driving around to



Photo by Brian Bowen Smith

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MUSIC

their chemistry degree finals."

The band is in a tremendous position these days, being able to discuss such a robust career and discography. There are no signs of slowing down either. On the day that we spoke, the band was heading into rehearsal to work on a fourth new song — one penned by Hexum and Sexton. A new album should be out by next year. And P-Nut says that editing work is currently in progress for *Enlarged to Show Detail 3*, the forthcoming installment of the band's behind-the-scenes DVD series (*ETSD 2* came out 14 years ago).

The archive release follows last year's *Stereolithic*, widely beloved by the fans and hailed as a return to the fundamental elements of 311's songwriting. Songs like "The Great Divide" and "First Dimension" call back the bass-heavy blend of upbeat lyrical wit and rapid-fire introspection.

"Before that, with *Universal Pulse* and *Uplifter*, we were searching and not really finding what we were looking for," P-Nut says. "We got better at communicating. I think that's the best thing [producer] Bob Rock taught us in those sessions with him."

With longtime producer Scotch Ralston back onboard for the last album, the band dug through older material and took stock of where their sonic journey had led them over the years. P-Nut says that Scotch's presence allowed the musicians to be "weirder" and truer to their own personalities in the studio. Banter between songs on the album evinces as much.

"We can straighten out the musical highway to the point of boringness sometimes," P-Nut confesses. "Scotch is the roadside attraction that keeps it interesting. [The album is] dark and it's sad, and maybe it can be lonely. It's got those fringe emotional elements that we haven't really let in that much. There's something about having that sixth member of the band — or seventh member, since we've had our manager for almost as long as we've known Scotch."

For all involved with the 311 trip, it's been a long, circuitous ride. They started out as the hometown boys from Omaha, gigging at small venues around their high school. And through grit and optimism, they decided to take the

ultimate trek out west.

"When we moved out to California in February 1992, after putting in a year and a half of gigs in Omaha and the surrounding areas — Lincoln, Kansas City — I was still in high school, and I graduated early," P-Nut says. "I didn't really think we were going to stay. I couldn't really understand leaving. None of it really clicked. It was all one hour at a time. I was 17. These guys easily became my best friends, and even more than that, my family. That's how we see it. People will talk about that, but you can see the proof in our music and our relationships."

Following the Capricorn signing, the band cut *Music* in a proper studio and then made *Grassroots* in their house. It was clear, though, that the lifeblood of their early years would be pumped through years on the road.

"We're going to go play our music in Tupelo, and we're gonna rock the house," P-Nut says. "And if there's one person that gets it, it's going to be okay because that's how this gets started. And then we played *Red Rocks* three years later. That was a huge one. Like, 'We should be able to do this the rest of our lives.'"

And they have. 311 remains one of the hardest-working bands in the U.S., churning out albums and tours left and right. The five guys in the band have maintained their stance as forward-thinking musicians, always looking to grow their sound and try new things. P-Nut admits that when old 311 stuff comes up on his iPod, he doesn't often hesitate to skip the track.

But still: "I always enjoy the way it sounds. We put in the time to make it sound great," P-Nut says. "The ideas: I'm kind of a harsh critic and I don't want to be soft on us. I'm always surprised at how cool we are, and I love that. Those first six or seven albums are still great albums. But I'm in the band and I can be hard on us. We've been trying to figure it out. We've been together for 25 years. We've been around long enough to make some mistakes and to live through them. We have a great fanbase that allows us to figure out what we're doing. It's a blank check to be who we are and say what we want to say."

esandy@clevelandscene.com
@EricSandy