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Scott Yager's

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

311: THE BOYS OF SUMMER

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311: The Boys of Summer

Interview by: Scott Yager

This issue is filled with bands that are known for putting on great summer tours like OAR and Guster. Whether it's bands like these or the big festivals like Lollapalooza or Bonnaroo that get you excited there is no doubt that live music and big summer tours are one of, if not THE reason people look forward to the warmest season the most.

One band has managed to become widely successful as a summer touring act, almost never taking a year off and consistently selling out their shows for the past twenty years. In the year 2011 it seems appropriate that this is the year that 3...11, who celebrated "311 Day" in style this past March (3/11/11), cement themselves as THE premiere summer rock band.

With their newest record Universal Pulse hitting stores last week and their big three-day Pow Wow Festival on the horizon, 311 could not be happier with where their career is at the moment. Aaron "P-Nut" Willis has been slapping the bass for 311 since the band formed in the late 80's. He dropped by The Sound to talk about the new record, how the band has maintained their level of success, and a whole lot more:

"We're just trying to take advantage of this momentum we have. Ever since the year clicked over into 2011 we've seen it as if we work hard enough we can really get people excited about the new music and the tour."

311 have separated themselves from the pack by touring almost every single summer, whether they are supporting a new album or not, vowing to please their extremely dedicated fan-base by providing them with a wide variety of their extremely vast library of material. You never know what song you might hear 311 play off of their ten studio albums, something you can't say about every band out there. P-Nut talks about the added pressure of having almost every one of their over 200 songs in their back pocket at all times by saying, "We know the songs. They're in there somewhere. Memorization is something that a touring band has to be good at and if you're in 311 you have to be really good at it."

It's clear the band has very high standards for what they are able to put out there for their audience and the fact that they maintain that high standard is what keeps the same people coming out each and every year.

"We've gotta play 70 plus songs on a tour or I don't think we're working hard enough. And we're not testing the audience cause that's longevity for me. If

you test your audience in a way that they appreciate it and you stretch them a little bit and they expand, and they're just more and more open to what you're capable of, than you've got a career in front of you son! Its not going to dwindle, it's going to expand. You're going to get better and your audience is going to come along for the ride."

311's tours have become synonymous with the summer months, as every year around May/June fans of the band expect that tickets for that years annual party hosted by 311 will soon be on sale. You begin to see the same faces coming back each year, wearing the amount of 311 shows they have been to as a badge of honor.

311 are known for having a diverse crowd of men and women of all ages and backgrounds at their shows. This is due to in part to how complex of a band 311 is. When talking about their average crowd P-nut says, "It's a diverse group no matter what. We're not one kind of band."

311 also manages to reach a very wide audience by constantly bringing bands or acts on tour with them that may not be exactly like them. Last summer they toured with The Offspring, a high energy punk band that seems to fit in with 311 tracks like Down and Feels So Good. In the past however 311 has toured with Hip Hop acts like The Roots, Jay-Z and Snoop Dogg, acts that 311 fits in with based on rap-like elements in their sound but also in their quest for unity, using their relationships with great artists in other genres to unite their audiences and create a wider scope. P-nut remembers the Snoop Dogg tour in particular for something they learned through the process of sharing the stage with such an icon.

"I don't think we were ever going to let someone that famous open up for us, even if they say yes. That was climbing a mountain every night. I think in between our songs people were like 'hey you remember when Snoop Dogg was on and he was killing it with the gin and the juice?'"

311 spend so much time on the road that most of their memories are associated with being in a certain location at a certain time, and perhaps a specific show. P-Nut remembers where the band was the day that Michael Jackson died. 311 was playing on the Central Park Summer Stage, a big moment for the band even without the history making aspect of a music legend's passing.

"It felt like this turning of the page. As much as everyone knew exactly what he

was doing for a few years. It was just crazy playing that gig in New York really felt like the emotional key to the city for me, and maybe to a lesser degree to the other guys. I get caught up in the emotion of it all. But it really feels like, when a city let us play sacred ground like that, that all this hard work has really paid off."

The one thing that might have been missing from 311's summer legacy was their own festival but that has changed since 311 has created The Pow Wow Festival, a three-day event in Florida the first weekend in August where 311 will be playing four sets, including their album *Transistor* in it's entirety, while being accompanied by several other bands like Sublime w/ Rome, Deftones, Reel Big Fish and more! Whether the festival becomes an annual event or not it still acts as another symbol of 311's success, as not any band could put together an event like this and sell an entire festival based solely on their reputation as a band. 311 puts on these really cool shows for their fans because their fans do such a good job of letting the band know what it is they want. P-nut shares, "our fans came up with the idea for 311 day, that's how in tune our fans are with where we need to go"

P-Nut seems to think that if the festival is a success it is something we could see every year. As for the cruise that took place this past March, P-nut reveals that it will not be the last. "We're going to announce details about another cruise after Pow Wow is done."

The latest record, *Universal Pulse*, seems to acknowledge 311's place as a summer band as a whole but does so most notably with it's first single, "Sunset in July" which directly refers to the shows 311 plays each year during the summer nights. "Rockers by my side, time's flying by" sings Nick Hexum during the song's chorus, serving as a thank you to the many concert goers who make it a point to check out 311 around July or August each and every year.

Universal Pulse seems like the perfect addition to the 311 catalog with songs that talk about the summer, thank their fans, and anthems you can picture being a part of great sets down the road. *Universal Pulse* is both short and sweet. P-Nut talks about why *Universal Pulse*, their shortest album yet, is only 8 tracks:

"We're about 50% independent, no one is telling us that we have to put 11 songs on the album no one is telling us we can't put 25 songs. It's great. We're in the do what we want phase and it feels right. The thing that we need to do though, since the output is a little lower album wise, we need to keep the music coming out at a faster rate and that's the challenge we're giving ourselves."

P-nut shares some details about the bands songwriting process, saying that although they all work together to create the majority of the material that "its either Nick or Chad to come up with the first idea for a song, almost always." P-nut goes on however to share a specific story of how the first track on *Universal Pulse*, "Time Bomb" was written in a collaborative effort:

"Nick just grabbed me and said were going to write lyrics right now. I called my wife and told her I was going to be a little late and two hours later, with Bob Rock in the room we hashed out what ended up being like 80% of the song. The chorus kind of came out of me in one sentence."

P-nut continues to talk about how special it is when something is organically created out of nothing, comparing the satisfaction to actually being on stage and playing the song itself:

"That's almost as good as playing a show. It is a little bit better than playing a show, just coming up with something right in the spot that turns into something that you know people really enjoy."

311 is one of the few bands who have managed to maintain a level of success without being looked at as a failure for not becoming the biggest band in the world and without being looked at as sell-outs for playing huge venues year round. The balance between respect from their fans and admiration for the entire process is what keeps 311 grounded and their fans along for the ride with them. P-nut describes their place in music as "were under the radar but were playing amphitheaters. Its great, we don't need and but this touring machine to really help us and our audience see each other."

The fast paced and energetic two hour sets that 311 puts on each week are only sample sizes of the monster performances they save for special occasions like 311 Day or next week's Pow Wow Festival. Whereas most bands waste 70% of their songs by never breathing second life into them after the albums, 311 makes sure that you feel validated for listening to the entire album. "I feel like the biggest fan and I just happen to be in the band. And I just happen to be able to influence our direction to a certain degree if I don't get shot down, like I do....a lot" says P-nut, who seems to be the driving force between a lot of 311's most ambitious undertakings.

For a group of guys that does not seem like they are slowing down any time soon, it seems convenient that the fuel that these guys need to keep going at such a high level is conveniently appearing in front of them each and every night. To P-nut and the boys from 311, being out there live and taking in the energy from the fans in the crowd is something that will never get old.

"It's a different thing when you're pushing it into people and you're staring at them and you're both sweating. Its magic. There's nothing like being on stage with my four best friends. I think everyone knows it as they see the look on my face."

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