

Chad Sexton

Everything about 311 seems epic: their longstanding lineup, their semi-annual concert/celebration, their throngs of dedicated fans—not to mention the grooves of their founding drummer.



It's rare that a band can survive with the same lineup beyond the first few albums, but the same five musicians who make up 311 have been thriving together for more than twenty-five years. The group has managed to remain a staple of both radio and the summer touring circuit, and every other year since 2010 it's thrown a huge performance/celebration for diehard fans on its own unofficial holiday, 311 Day.

For the band's recently released twelfth album, *Mosaic*, drummer Chad Sexton wrote the music for two songs and mixed twelve of the seventeen tracks. "This new record has been two and a half years in the making," Sexton tells *Modern Drummer*. "That's one of the longest times we've spent on a record. It gave us the benefit of trying out a bunch of different things and making sure the arrangements and our parts were right.

Every record of ours is pretty different, and this is just the latest version of our musical adventure."

Experimenting with gear and recording environments has been a constant in 311's history. For *Mosaic*, Sexton tracked drums at the band's North Hollywood studio, the Hive. "We've owned that studio since probably 2000," he says. "We've tried different things. On our 2009 record [*Uplifter*] I recorded the



Iron Mike Savola

drums in Burbank at another studio, and the drums for *Stereolithic* [2014] were done at my house. This time I figured I'd bring it back to the Hive. I'm glad I did, because it's hard to beat the Neve mic preamps that we have there for recording. We're always trying to get great sounds and change it up, even though we have our own studio."

Sexton suggests that audio engineering legend Rupert Neve's handiwork has been

as important to 311's recorded sound as any of the instruments. "I'm so thankful for the dude," he says. "He visited our studio once, because he designed the board that we have, a 72-channel AMEK Neve 9098. I don't think there are very many of those boards, but they're very particular in terms of the sound and the quality of the EQs and the mic preamps. They're really top of the line. We love the old-school '70s and '80s Neves as well—the 1073s and stuff like that. They're great, especially for snare sounds, and that will always be a badass sound. But the 9098s are more like a modern Neve, like a '70s muscle car with modern technology."

If you've followed Sexton's gear choices over the years, you may recall him using Remo Falams marching snare heads, but Coated Ambassadors or Emperors have proven more favorable to him of late. "When you have a snare drum that rings out—and it's not just one note, but when the drum's singing for a long time—when you get the rest of the band in, you can't really hear all that ring anymore," Chad explains. "That's kind of the reason for us looking to have a live-er sound. More open and with more high-end presence—resonance, basically. Falams heads weren't working out [in that regard]. I wish they were, because I had a real unique sound with them back in the day. But it's a different day."

Mosaic's snare sound originated for the most part with a 5.5x14 steel-shell Pearl Sensitone model. "It's a great go-to drum," Sexton says, "and I'd been using it live. I have too many snare drums. It gives me a lot of options, but if you want to search out all those options, it really takes up time. But we tried them out, new and old. I even tried out the snare drum I recorded my first record on, in 1992 [an early 6.5x14 maple Pearl Free Floating model]. I was really hoping that was going to be the drum on the whole record, but I think we got it onto one song." These days brass and phosphor bronze Sensitones are also in Sexton's regular rotation, as is a 6.5x14 Masterworks snare that matches his current touring kit.

A band generally doesn't last twenty-seven years without a shared sense of humor, and 311's appearance on *The Eric Andre Show*, a television comedy series on Adult Swim, certainly confirms that's the case with Sexton and his bandmates. "They approached us and asked if we'd be on his show, and we said, 'Are you serious!' And they said, 'Yeah, and he wants to kind of torture you guys while you're playing.' We didn't really know what

Sexton plays Pearl drums and percussion and Sabian cymbals, and he uses Remo heads, Grip Peddler pedal pads, and Vater sticks.

was going to happen, but we're usually good sports and don't take ourselves too seriously, so we decided to do it. I think Eric Andre is hilarious, and it was a good experience. They kept shocking me as I played, and that was pretty funny, and then he would come over and beat me with a foam rubber bat. It actually put a few bruises on me. But I get it—it has to look real."

Among the things that 311 is famous for is its habit of playing songs from throughout its enormous repertoire. The band's 311 Day concerts and 311 Caribbean cruises—which take place on alternating years—involve career-spanning set lists, as well as special guests. This year's 311 Day show is split into two nights, but the 2014 edition comprised three sets featuring sixty-six songs, played over five hours, with appearances by the Rebirth Brass Band, a thirteen-piece orchestra, and a marching drum line joining Sexton during his regular solo feature on "Applied Science."

"Drum corps really helped me in terms of memorizing [large amounts of] music," Sexton says. "And it's not a bunch of loops. It's different in almost every measure, through the entire show. So practicing that while I was a kid really helps me retain drum parts from twenty years ago."

As far as his approach to revisiting five hours' worth of 311 music for one performance? "We just get in there and do it," Sexton says. "We don't really think about it. We will do a lot of rehearsing, because there's a lot of songs. But that's what 311 Day is about, playing some of the deep cuts throughout our history so that the hardcore fans can hear songs they only get to hear maybe every two years. That's how 311 Day started out, and it's grown into something kind of special."

The event has become a true year-round operation; the day after their summer tour ends, the band is already writing the next record and planning the next massive party. "You know, organizing so many people and [planning] special things we do, and then all of the crew getting ready and making visual content—it's a long process," Sexton says. "But at least we're ahead of the curve, and that's what we'll be doing [until the next event], just preparing for the future."

Stephen Bidwell

