

311—Straight From the Heartland

by michael vogel
photography alison dyer

Back almost eight years ago, inspired by some of the greatest groups of the early punk-rock movement, (Sex Pistols, The Clash, Ramones and the Buzzcocks), 311 formed in the heart of middle America—Omaha, Nebraska. Through three self-produced indie albums and an exhaustive touring schedule that has helped them cultivate one of the most intense (and biggest) “grassroots” fan bases around, the band has managed to maintain their straight-up, melodic hard-core style.

Flash to 1991. 311 trades in nearly two years of hard work and sweat to go with “the man.” Goin’ corporate, if you will. At the time, band-leader Nicholas Hexum says, “We’re going to do what we want to do, and we’re always going to be the people we’ve always been. So, in the long run, I don’t think it makes much difference either way.” Cut to the present, 1997. The boys of 311 are riding high on the success of their multi-Platinum third album, which has spawned three Top 20 tracks, including the #1 alternative juggernaut “Down.” They’ve recorded four albums since signing with Capricorn. Their new album, *Transistor*, has yet to be released, but the guys were already packing their bags in preparation for a whirlwind tour of Europe. Unfazed by the rush of the moment, Nick Hexum invited me to his new home, nestled high atop the Hollywood Hills, to catch up on the last few months, as well as to treat me to an exclusive preview of some highly tasty tracks from the new record. [Somewhere, throughout the rest of Hollywood, 311’s other four symphonic-hipsters—Chad, P-Nut, Tim and S.A.—were busily making preparations and tying up loose ends before the impending trip abroad.]

Hexum is basically an open and friendly guy who defines what growing up in America’s heartland is all about. Relaxing in an antique dining room chair, with an illuminated Dodger Stadium just over his shoulder, Mr. Hexum is quite game to give me a little insight into the new album. In between final trip preparations and some last-minute phone calls (as well as a few quick games of billiards), Nick is ready to talk.

“We’ve changed a lot and then some/ You know that we have always been down/ And if I ever didn’t thank you/Then just let me do it now.”



—excerpted from “Down

“We all feel very fortunate. If it ever gets stressful, we remember that there are others out there who are less fortunate than us. Everyone has to have a job, yet the job that we have is something that we would, for the most part, be doing for fun anyway. I think the rap to ‘Starshines’ states it the best—‘I am a music lover and somehow I get paid/This song would still exist if no money was made/That’s the difference!’”

The band’s long-time fans needn’t worry about the spectre of a possible 311 sell-out—the new material is the same intense, streamlined rock-meets-reggae cocktail that has always been the signature of their sound. The simplicity of the project shines through, and the 21 tracks on the album paint a clear picture of what’s going on with the band.

“It’s a lot rawer,” Nick says of *Transistor*’s overall vibe, as a cool summer-time breeze and sirens from the city below float in through the window. “We just tried to think of it in artistic terms. But that also made us relax a little more, as well as have more fun, overall. It’s the energy that is important. We felt we could get more out of each song, as well as go off further on certain tangents. Our sound is pretty different when we play in a live forum. We deliver the song with more force, and there is a lot heavier of a groove and power that you really can’t appreciate until you see us play in front of a live audience. We do have ‘album’ fans, but first and foremost, the most important thing to us has always been playing

live. We aren’t going to be media manipulators, or fashion kings, or this week’s bunch of bad boys. All we want to do is play the music.”

That kind of intensity smacks like an open hand to the back of the neck throughout *Transistor*’s nearly two dozen depth charges. At the time of my introduction to the new album, the songs hadn’t even been set into any type of running sequence, yet there was nothing remotely resembling a weak link in the bunch. “It was simply time to challenge our fans as well as ourselves. We really wouldn’t feel proud of the album if it were simply a rehash of the same old thing. Fortunately, our fans have always embraced the different changes and styles we have employed over the last few albums,

but at the same time, they demand we continue to really let it rock. We believe that *Transistor* embodies that kind of creative philosophy.

“There are some really hard-core songs, like ‘What Was I Thinking’ and ‘Electricity,’ and then there is ‘Galaxy,’ which could be the most intense of them all,” exclaims Nick. “Galaxy” is probably the most obvious tip that a dose of their roots just may have filtered its way into their present trip. Yet, for all the savage shades that abound on *Transistor* (in addition to slots in regular rotations on MTV and Alternative Radio), 311 aren’t really out to prove anything, other than that they haven’t changed a bit since becoming a multi-Platinum band.

“Tune in/ For those who are waitin’/ Vision/ Feel it from within/ Sing along.”

“We’re not really trying to get the music heard anymore. We’re really just trying to maintain our creative level and maintain our fan base. Even though we’re aware that our records are going out to potential millions, we try to stay focused in somewhat of a grassroots orientation, where we make music that will appeal to our family and friends. But, by trying something new, our goal is not to try and bring in those that were not supporters of the band before. Instead, we concentrate our energies on what we need to do in order to get the job done and rock the house. It’s not so much that we’re looking to grab the Hootie and the Blowfish fans as we are trying to make lasting impressions with the existing fan base.

"The bottom line is that we've always done exactly what we wanted to do," explains Hexum, leaning across the table to express the extreme seriousness of this response. Together with Chad Sexton, Timothy J. Mahoney, Count S.A. Martinez and P-Nut, Nick formed 311 back in 1990. "I guess we must have been somewhat ahead of our time. We have been making music like this, mixing beats with rock and reggae, for years now."

311 has also gained a little breathing room when it comes to being labeled as a band whose lyrics are capable of an ultra-blunt lashing effect. They have often been classified as having some very strong political beliefs. Examples of this can be found in such songs as "Unity" from *Music*, "Applied Science" on *Grassroots* and "Guns (Are For Pussies)" from their third self-titled release, to name just a few. According to Nicholas, *Transistor* carries on in that same fashion, but at the same time takes a good hard look at the individual and his place in the universe.

"You're a transistor/ Lightning resistor/ Conducting to the mother star/ That's what you are."

"The concept behind the name *Transistor*, whether you realize it or not, is that we are all diodes, or circuits, of the same like. Our nerves are like electrical wires that are carrying impulses to the brain to create our individual thoughts. Therefore, we are all transistors of the same electrical force that comes from the song. I guess it would be something similar to conducting through the mother star. All living creatures, both animals and plants, are exchanging the same electricity. It is a message of unity that we are all one interconnected organism. Therefore, the differences we see in the people around us are nothing more than individual elements that help to make us part of one great big organism."

Taking that kind of inspiration to heart, Hexum—who is normally very much immersed in 311's composing and recording process—moved a little farther away from being the central singer/songwriter to a more relaxed and integrated member of the band. "Personally, I have been listening to more singers than rappers. On the last album, I had a rap on almost every song, whereas for *Transistor*, I have only two raps on the entire album. The vocals styles of S.A. and myself are very complementary. Where he is more of a hard-core rapper, I tend to reflect the styles of jazz/reggae crooners. The rap and hip-hop feel will always be a part of the music we do, but for this record, we wanted to concentrate more on melodies. It is essential to the longevity of the song. If there is no melody, the song



photo danny clinch

will eventually become dated, fitting only that musical climate [of] when it was written. But if it has a melody, which defines the essence of what dancehall reggae is all about, the song should have lasting appeal. Overall, we would like to think of our songs as potential standards, rather than something simply destined for a mosh pit!"

"During the recording of our last album, *311*, we were creating some pretty tasty rock riffs and then combining them with vocal raps. A very simplistic approach, compared to the recording of *Transistor*, where the lyrics were composed simultaneously with the music. Each song is written with a specific melody in mind, leaving room for improvisation in order to add some extra texture to the music. Without it, there is no sense in continuing with that project. In short, slapping two things together doesn't accurately portray the picture the song is trying to create, as well as having a complete vision and then seeing it through to its completion."

"Overall, everyone in the band has really grown and matured since the last album. [Chad] Sexton's beats and [Tim] Mahoney's solos are always amazing, but the biggest difference is S.A. and P-Nut's growth in the song writing forum."

"Every life form is based on this simplicity/ The soul that you have is electricity."

But, like each of its predecessors, neither *Transistor* or the band itself can be defined by anything less than four words. "Reggae and dancehall music have always been such a love of ours that we felt compelled to play it, as well as try and bring some much needed attention to the whole genre. It satisfies the whole band because of the intense rhythms of rap music, but also because of the melodies that reggae music provides. Therefore, our style for this record is a combination of the two. Each song is so completely different and unique, though no one descriptive term can accurately describe the whole album. There are some rock songs, others that combine hip-hop beats with dancehall vocals and a '60s style surf guitar sound into

what has become a unique 311 formula. Simply stated, *Transistor* is a quasi-musical cocktail of funk, rock, rap, and reggae, with a few other spices thrown in. As a result, the music can be enjoyed by almost everyone."

With guitarist Timothy J. handling all the blistering lead riffs, Nick providing layers of rhythm on the guitar, and P-Nut and Chad laying down the beat, it's up to Count S.A. on the turntables to add sonic texture to the song. "Improvisation starts with a unique riff that hasn't been used by anyone else. If it is adding to the overall groove of the song then we'll stick with it and just let

everything else flow. But if there are five musicians shredding at the same time, the music wouldn't sound right. People need to know when to sit back and when to take center stage. In our case, this album reflects a lot more of S.A.'s vocal stylings, as well as adding the new element of turntables as a viable instrument into the musical mix. By doing so, we can explore on a wider musical scale without having to rely solely on the vocals."

The sounds of *311* and *Transistor* are undeniably aggressive, but Nick is also very quick to respond that listeners should not mistake high energy for aggression. "A lot of people confuse aggressive music with angst-filled emotions. Some bands try to capitalize on this emotional response, integrating the anger into their own kind of sound to produce the desired level of energy. We would never sacrifice our own personal happiness to make the music sound more emotional—besides, I don't believe that someone has to be really upset in order to rock really hard these days. Energy and emotions can come from almost anywhere. To limit them to just the negative experience would be a great disservice to yourself and those around you. Musicians don't necessarily need to have a tortured soul in order to be considered believable, as well as evoke an emotional response from the audience. Our music may sound aggressive, but we're not letting off anger—we are jumping for joy!"

Point made. It is that kind of sensible thinking and grass-roots attitude that has helped to propel 311 to even higher levels of success against the back-drop of an angry society. You might be able to take the boys out of Omaha, but you simply can't take Omaha out of the boys! In all, 311 can best be summarized with the opening lyrics to "Strangers," the first track off *Transistor* that I originally heard in demo form.

"I can show you where's the beat/ And you can do as you feel as long as you move/ Two perfect strangers sharing a groove." ■