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RETURN OF THE FUNK, THE MUSIC, & THE *Omaha Stylee*



311's Nick Hexum on Roots & Resilience

L-R Tim Mahoney, Doug "SA" Martinez, Nick Hexum,
Aaron "P-Nut" Wills, and Chad Sexton of 311



In April 21, 1998, Omaha Magazine's own Damian Ingersoll submitted his final paper as a Jefferson High School senior in Des Moines, Iowa. The 11-page essay was clearly a labor of love. Titled "A History of 311," the opening sentence read:

"311 of Omaha, Nebraska, is one of the best bands around today."

Some 25 years later, Ingersoll's thesis remains well supported.

On September 29, 2023, a sell-out crowd swarmed the grounds of the newly opened Astro Theater in La Vista, Nebraska. 311 had returned home to celebrate the 30th anniversary of their debut studio album, *Music*.

Clad in a Union Omaha Soccer T-shirt, frontman Nick Hexum—with vocalist/DJ Doug "SA" Martinez, lead guitarist Tim Mahoney, Aaron "P-Nut" Wills on bass, and Chad Sexton on the sticks—opened the set with a heavy-hitter. Hexum's smooth, rueful tenor met the snarling riffs and punchy drums of their hit song "Beautiful Disaster," and the crowd went wild.

311's reputation for dynamic stage presence and killer live performances has hardly waned over the decades.

As Hexum noted, "We've mellowed a little bit...but not much!"

That energy can be traced back to Omaha during the 1980s; Hexum played in a cover band called "The Ed's" with Mahoney and met Sexton in jazz band at Westside High School. The three shared a passion for exploring musical genres, and eventually, a desire to create something novel by bending them.

Hexum, Mahoney, and Sexton celebrated high school graduation. Hexum had graduated a year early, but he was back in town from Los Angeles for his friends' ceremony.

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They had a jam session that laid the bones for what would become 311—for now, a band called Unity.

Members of the group frequently shuffled between living in Omaha and Los Angeles,

and it was over a 1,500-mile stretch of telephone line connecting the cities that 311 was truly born. An incredible musical opportunity had emerged, not in L.A. but Omaha; when Sexton revealed to Hexum that his band (which included a young "P-Nut" Wills) was opening for punk outfit Fugazi at Sokol, the latter found himself in the pull of the 'Big O' once more.

The concert was a success, and the newly christened 311 would continue to produce original music—recording 11 tracks at Papillion's IEV Studio, collectively called Dammit! and distributing it via 300 cassette tapes.

With the reintroduction of Mahoney (over then guitarist, Jim Watson) and frequent collaborator "SA" Martinez not long after, the final line-up for 311 was cemented (and hasn't shifted since).

As for the name itself, the band has stated it resulted from the aforementioned guitarist Jim Watson being booked for skinny dipping in a public pool. The arresting officers wrote "311" on the ticket—the Omaha Police Department's code for indecent exposure.

Equal parts rock, reggae, hip hop, and funk, punctuated by the paradoxically harmonious contrasts of Hexum and Martinez' vocals, 311 garnered a loyal fan base by playing live shows in the Omaha bar scene and other smaller venues like Peony Park.

"After coming up in clubs like the Ranch Bowl and Howard Street Tavern we saw that we could whip crowds into a frenzy, and that really gave us the confidence to know we had something special," Hexum recalled. "We found that if we unleashed high energy, the crowd would feed off of that and lose their inhibitions and go crazy."

The band would go on to sign a record deal with Capricorn Records and in February of 1993, release the album *Music* under the guidance of renowned British record producer and audio engineer, Eddy Offord.

"On that first album we learned we could say yes to experimentation, an anything-goes attitude," Hexum said. "We told our producer we wanted to use percussion and samples and hip-hop beats mixed into our rock music. That was not common at the

time. We got a kick out of defying genres and that's something that's really stayed with us."

While promoting the album and financing their own tour, the band cruised from show to show in an old RV loaned by Sexton's father and a Volkswagen bus packed with equipment in tow.

During a drive to a show in Kansas City, a sharp incline set the RV careening, and after the ensuing crash, aflame. As the fire grew and threatened to encircle them, the band filed out the only functional door and leapt to safety. All of their equipment and personal affects were lost to the blaze, but no one was seriously injured.

Despite the smoldering setback, the band knuckled down and continued their tour with borrowed equipment.

"I feel like growing up in the Midwest just teaches you to be resilient," Hexum recalled. "There's something about the culture that fosters resilience, and it was a skill my dad really helped to instill in me."

That resilience paid off—the band's 1995 release the self-titled *311* went triple-platinum and hit No. 12 on the Billboard 200 thanks to hit singles like "Down" and "All Mixed Up."

Over the proceeding three decades, 311 has performed throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, and Australia. To date, the band has released 13 studio albums, two live albums, and four compilation records, along with four EPs and four DVDs.

Beyond a nod to their big break, 311's return to the metro is an acknowledgment of what came before—the wild, impassioned, homegrown crowds that pushed and encouraged the band to take that step.

"It's always been well-known that Omaha rock crowds are some of the most energetic around," Hexum affirmed. "It's hard to say why except maybe people aren't jaded like you might get on the coasts."

Besides, there's more yet to come for 311's relationship with Omaha. After all, the Union Omaha tee Hexum wore on The Astro stage wasn't just for show—as had been announced the day prior, he's the soccer club's newest co-owner. **OMAHA!**

For more information, visit 311.com.