

STREET SCENE



Wide-ranging styles: 311 blends hip-hop, jazz, funk, and pop melodies into its music. The band — from left, vocalist SA Martinez, bassist P-Nut, guitarist Nicholas Hexum, and drummer/percussionist Chad Sexton — come to the State Theatre on Thursday, Feb. 22.

For Omaha's 311 'interesting' music is their top priority

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

The rock/hip-hop band 311 has been kicking around, since its inception in 1990. Sold-out club dates followed and consequently the band's first two albums, "Music" and "Grassroots" have sold in excess of 100,000 each.

Now, six years later, 311 has its first across-the-dial national hit single, "Don't Stay Home," and another, "All Mixed Up," on the way. Both songs are off the band's self-titled third album.

Band members should have known that success with 311 was in the cards. After all, 311's first gig was with punk legends Puzos.

"We kind of lucked out for that show," drummer/percussionist Chad Sexton said. "It was only one show but it helped our fan base in Omaha (311's hometown). We were unknown and we played in front of 800 people. When you're unknown, 800 people is a lot."

"It just gave us a little bit of confidence."

The album "311" (Capricorn) blends traditional rap with rock, jazz, funk and reggae. A bold, multi-dimensional band like that would have to have some innate confidence.

Sexton explained that the band members' diverse musical influences — ranging from jazz artists to Frank Sinatra to rockers Monster Magnet to the Grateful Dead — helped create the 311 sound.

"We were influenced by all these different kinds of music and it showed through in our music writing. It's more of a collaborative effort instead of a basic rock song."

He added that "interesting" music is a priority with 311.

"To me, the No. 1 thing has not been to sell as many records as you can but to make the most interesting music you can," Sexton explained.

"I thought we would be successful if we just made really good music and really unique music. I always thought that would be the first thing that everyone would want to do. Now I realize there's people in the business who are not even in it for the music, which isn't a big surprise anymore. It is a surprise how few people are out there who are well known who solely concentrate on how much money they can make."

311 is comprised of five guys — lead vocalist/rhythm guitarist Nicholas Hexum, drummer Sexton, guitarist Tim Mahoney, bassist P-Nut, and vocalist SA Martinez — who grew up together in Omaha, Neb. Sexton said that

My belief is for this type of music it takes listeners a longer time to understand where the band is coming from. Instead of listening to it and right off the bat loving it, it takes five times before you'll love it.

Chad Sexton
drummer/percussionist

being raised in Omaha didn't have much of an effect on 311.

"It was more of a good place for us to grow up. We have good values and things like that. That all goes to help in your mental stability later on."

The positive lyrics on "311," however, prove that Omaha had some influence on them. In the anti-weapon song "Guns," Hexum and Martinez write "You guys think that you're hard/But you're in fear of being harmed/I fear no man and I am unarmed."

Along the same vein is "Mis-directed Hostility": "So much angst and pain, it's so wack/You should take a tip from the one (singer) Frank Black/Play some Pachinko, Play some Pachinko/ Cause all the angst (stuff) is just cheesy."

Sexton said that Hexum and Martinez, the group's main songwriters, are motivated by daily events.

"I've heard them say before that their own daily experiences (motivate them). SA tends to be a little more abstract, though. But generally the overall message is one of positivity and just really spilling out what they've learned," Sexton said.

After six years of working hard, he said it doesn't bother him that mainstream audiences are just now catching on.

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Cypress Hills, the Pharcyde and 311 play a sold-out show at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 22, at the State Theatre, 2116 Woodward Ave., Detroit. For more information, call (313) 961-5451.

Drummer gets tips on success

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

A few years ago, the Rochester Hills alternative rock band Higher was a publicity-hungry, promotion machine. Complete with a flashy press kit, pretty-boy looks and an album re-mixed by Jack Ponti of Skid Row fame, Higher's short-lived career was a classic case of trying too hard to get what you want.

Drummer Michael Falzon jumped ship before the "official" end of the band hoping to start a new project. He played around with a few local bands but still unsure of his musical future, Falzon took a chance that most people probably wouldn't be brave enough to do.

"The Afghan Whigs were looking for a drummer so on a whim I sent some of my work to their manager. A week later John Curley, the bass player, called me up at home and said, 'I really like your stuff.'"

The following week, the alternative rock band's charismatic singer Greg Dulli phoned up Falzon and asked if he could come down to Cincinnati, the Whigs' hometown, to try out.

Falzon rehearsed with the band, according to an Elektra Entertainment spokeswoman, but in the end was passed up for Memphis musician Paul Buchignani, who appears on the demos and final recordings for the Afghan Whigs' new album "Black Love" which is due out Tuesday, March 12.

Falzon — a 26-year-old graduate of Adams High School in Rochester — has fond memories of his stint.

"It was cool because I got to sit there and play with my favorite band. It was kind of surreal," Falzon said.

There's no hard feelings because, after all, Falzon got some valuable tips that he hopes to use in Star 80's subtle trek to fame.

"I kind of picked John's brain about how they started. They did some shows in Cincinnati, but mostly every weekend they went out and played out of town as much as they could," Falzon said.

"So I started forming these ideas. I came back and Eric (Myers,



Up and coming 'stars': Star 80 — from left, singer/guitarist Eric Myers, bassist James Hurton, and drummer Michael Falzon — is releasing its debut CD on Saturday, Feb. 17, with a party and performance at the Old Miami in Detroit.

singer/guitarist of Star 80 and former Higher member) and I started getting a little more serious about the material for Star 80."

This week Star 80 is releasing its debut three-song EP on the Rochester-based Woodshed Records label. The CD release party will be held at 9 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 17, at the Old Miami, 3930 Cass Ave., on Wayne State University's campus in Detroit.

The CD, which includes a cover of Bruce Springsteen's "Fire" and two originals, "Luck" and "Star 80," Falzon said the band is using the CD to introduce Star 80 to clubs, the public, and media.

"It's just like a calling card," Falzon said during an interview at his Royal Oak home. "We're going in the studio to record demos just for people who want to hear more

stuff."

Star 80 is a far cry from the hard rock-flavored Higher. Choppy guitars (a la Afghan Whigs) and Myers' stripped down vocals pair up to create a Replacements-esque sound on "Luck."

On the song "Star 80," Myers and his fuzzy guitar bring along a PTD (post-Tanya Donnelly) Breeders sound while Falzon lays down the rhythm with bassist James Hurton, formerly of Ethos.

When the band members write songs, they push aside their influences, which range from Motown and Prince to Iggy Pop to traditional country.

"I think the main thing is when Eric comes up with the idea of the song, I kind of just don't think about my influences and I just play to the song. Eric's guitar

playing inspires me for my parts. I listen to a lot of stuff but I don't consciously try and incorporate aspects of stuff that I listen to. It's not a contrived thing at all."

Falzon added that Star 80's sound is still evolving.

"We've just begun to explore where we want to go with the music."

Star 80 celebrates its CD with party and performance at 9 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 17, at the Old Miami, 3930 Cass Ave., (between Alexandrine and Selden), Detroit. The show is open to those 21 and older. For more information, call (313) 831-3630. For more information about Star 80, write Woodshed Records, P.O. Box 82391, Rochester, MI 48308.



Celebrating release: The Volebeats — from left, singer/guitarist Jeff Oakes, singer/guitarist Matthew Smith, guitarist Bob McCreedy, bassist Russell Ledford, and unpictured drummer Scott Michalski.

Volebeats release plaintive, gorgeous EP

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

Thanks to bands like the Jayhawks, Wilco and Ben Volt, the country rock scene is flourishing. You'd think that the Oakland County-based Volebeats — who's a little more country than rock 'n' roll — would be thrilled about the "new" movement. But it's actually the opposite. Please take the pigeon-holing elsewhere.

"We had that sound down six years ago," said singer/songwriter/guitarist Matthew Smith.

"By the time we started being pigeon-holed, we were already trying to move the music away from that."

From a marketing standpoint, the timing couldn't be more perfect. The Volebeats have released the EP "Bittersweet" on the Royal Oak-based Third Gear Records. The six-song EP is a gorgeous col-

lection of trembling, twangy love songs that make the perfect soundtrack to an ending of a relationship.

The album kicks off with a breath-taking countrified version of Barry White's "I'm Gonna Love You Just a Little More, Baby."

On it, Jeff Oakes' vocals are so pain-filled that he sounds like he's imprisoned by a woman's love when he sings: "Deeper and deeper in love with you I'm falling/Deeper and deeper your tender words of love keep calling/Eager and eager, yeah, feel your sweet lips on my face/Please hear and please hear any time or any place."

The impeccable album continues with "Same Old You," written by former drummer Bill Peterson, where Oakes is again convincing as a broken-hearted lover: "I never

got beyond the very moment that we parted/My life without you never started/And it's so hard to find your way when you feel so broken hearted/I'm sad and lonely but my vision's strong and true/Still I keep waiting for that same old you."

"Bittersweet" is a segue to The Volebeats' follow-up to 1994's "Up North" which will be released on the New Hampshire-based Safe House Records, a longtime home to the Lunachicks and Half Japanese. So far the band has 16-16 songs recorded for the record due out in mid-'96. Since critical success, from the likes of Billboard, Option, Pulse and CMJ magazines followed the band after "Up North," that's sure to follow. But the modest band shrugs it off.

The Volebeats will make it on their own laurels, not because of a

trend. The "weirdness" of the band sets them apart.

"We're a weird band," said Smith who sings "Angel" on "Bittersweet." "We're not like other country rock bands. We're weirder. There's something unsettling and weird. It sounds normal to me but what I like about what we do is that underneath the melodic base there's a weirder vibe."

The Volebeats celebrates the release of "Bittersweet" with a party and performance at 9 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 17, at the Cass Cafe, 4620 Cass Ave. (two blocks south of Warren), Detroit. Cover charge is \$4. For more information, call (313) 831-1400. At 11 a.m. Friday, Feb. 16, the band will perform songs from "Bittersweet" on radio station WDET (101.9). For more information about The Volebeats, write Third Gear Records, P.O. Box 1866, Royal Oak, MI 48068.