

ML EXCLUSIVE

The Leader of the Pack

Nick Hexum: Two-time front man & family guy

Words by Vanessa Pascale
Photo Credit Matt McGinley

When I meet Nick Hexum in the driveway (he arrives seconds before me) of his Topanga based gated recording studio, a few minutes from his home, the first words that spill from my mouth are about my death-defying drive up the steep, cliff-riddled, guardrail-less, single lane dirt road to get there.

I follow the 43-year-old singer-guitarist-songwriter through the humble house into the kitchen. A reflection of his Midwestern upbringing (born in Madison, Wisconsin and raised in Omaha, Nebraska), Nick immediately offers me a beverage. We settle down in a space normally designated as the living room --though this space is dotted with a hodgepodge of non-matching chairs positioned around a mélange of instruments and music equipment-- to chat.

"Where did your fear of heights come from?" Nick asks. It's the fear of what could happen, I could drive over the edge and plunge to my death or the Ferris wheel seat could unhinge and bounce off, I prattle. It happens all the time. "All the time?" Nick incredulously questions me, then smiles. It happens enough, I counter. For someone, like Nick, who doesn't harbor such a neurosis and embraces "that kind of buzz," precipices are merely platforms to play atop, and jump off of. "I went hang gliding a couple of years ago. *That* is the craziest 'cause you have to run off a cliff... Your brain is like, *Don't go off this cliff...* I would like to skydive. I've never done that," says the bungee jumping enthusiast.

Recently, Nick took another major leap --fronting a second band, The Nick Hexum Quintet [the eponymous moniker a nod to the blue note 60s and 70s jazz groups] with his younger brother Zack, Gary Novak, Luke Miller and Andrés Rebellón. In mid-2011 whilst Nick and Zack were writing pop songs for various musicians [one hit of theirs is "Freak the Freak Out" sung by Victoria Justice], they redirected their efforts toward penning compositions for Nick to sing. Fusing these lyrics with a "New Orleans, funk style," their side project manifested into The Nick Hexum Quintet and the production of their first album, *My Shadow Pages*, released through Nick's record label, What Have You Records (to sidestep the "corrupt" record labels).

Of the 13 songs on *My Shadow Pages*, mixed by Jim Scott, Nick is particularly proud of "Sideways" and "A Song for Driving" for their melody and sound. "People have really responded to the song, "The Dreamer" and I like how that lyrically reveals things about my personality, like I say: *I never think there's a rainy day in my forecast / but the good times never last and then I feel like an outcast.*" A self-proclaimed optimist to a fault, his supposed character flaw has served him well. To reach multi-platinum proportions of success as 311 has, one must take the plunge with unwavering optimism.

Back when 311 was starting out, running a record label simply meant taking a box of tapes and CDs to local stores and selling them on consignment, Nick reminisces. A much simpler and easier time then, learning and navigating the new avenues of distribution,

getting the songs on Spotify and licensing have been an interesting experience for Nick. While he has collaborators, it's him hiring the band, paying for the album and studio -- running the show. "Being in a regular band, it's just more of a true democracy," he explains. "I was talking to Brandon [Boyd] from Incubus," he recounts, "It was fun to let my inner control freak just go nuts and not have to compromise on anything." He laughs.

Taking the reins has always been a position that Nick is comfortable in. He modestly concedes that his 311 band mates would graciously refer to him as the leader. "I've always been the guy, like, 'C'mon, let's move out to LA. We can do it!' Everyone's like, 'You sure? We're in Omaha and nobody does that.' And I'm like, 'Doesn't matter. Let's go.'" While Nick's voice remains even-keeled as he recollects these early years, it's evident in his expression that these are certainly the fondest of memories.

For Nick, there was never a backup plan. Ever. It was music or bust, he tells me. Music and the predilection for performing were vested in his soul from a young age. As a child influenced by Elvis and early rock 'n' roll, Nick would take his dad's Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis 45s and play them "extra fast and dance around like a crazy man." His parents' dinner party guests frequently had the pleasure of being entertained by Nick's lively lip-syncing concerts. "I was a real ham... always a real attention seeker. My parents say that when I was 5, I was already saying that I was going to be a rock star."

And rock star he's been, going on 24 years with 311 --where he plays the throat and guitar (the latter I pulled from his Twitter account). Nick started out as the band's bass player (he was infatuated with Red Hot Chili Peppers' bassist Flea), which P-Nut took over, before he stepped into his recognized role as the mesmerizing bleached blond front man. After our interview, Nick's plans were to record vocals and work on editing for the band's 11th album. "I'm really excited about a bunch of the songs on this new record. I think we've got a new spark. Working with Scott Ralston, our producer, has really fueled the flame of creativity," says Nick. The upcoming album is slated for release on 311 day, March 11, 2014, with an explosive kickoff concert in New Orleans. "We'll play like 60 songs in one night, so it's a really long show.... People come from all over the world -- like a convention for 311 fans," says Nick fervently.

As the sexy lead singer (who was a popular crush among many of my girlfriends growing up, myself included) of one of the hottest bands around, I expected Nick to have a few stories under his belt, and, fortunately for me, he wasn't shy about sharing a couple from his wild past. He candidly told me that a "Sid-and-Nancy" type relationship (and that's putting it tamely) with a Florida girlfriend yielded the lyrics for 311's hit song, "Beautiful Disaster." The ladies' man also confessed that he requested and received his own tour bus under the guise of needing it for recording purposes, which he did (The Cure cover, "Lovesong" was recorded onboard), but chiefly, to invite twenty or so girls aboard for all night ragers and not disturb his fellow band members (see, he wasn't thinking solely of himself).



I am happiest when...

"I'm creating. That process --to go from a little spark of an idea to hearing it demoed to teaching it...playing it live-- is incredible. All the time, when I'm working with the guys, I'll say, 'Can you believe we're at work right now?' This is so fun to do and to be able to make a career out of it truly is a dream come true."



In the early 2000s, Nick dated and was engaged to The Pussycat Dolls' Nicole Scherzinger, the muse for another hit song, "Amber." Nicole was also featured in the song's music video. But that rock star lifestyle, fraught with unpredictable late nighters, is a thing of the past now.

Nick has proudly stepped into the role of family man. Married since 2008 to Nikki, a writer/painter, the couple has two little girls: Echo (4) and Maxine (2). Today, you have a better chance at finding Nick in bed by 10 pm, barely catching a full episode of *Boardwalk Empire*. Claiming to be a very normal guy --we joke about the *US Weekly* section highlighting the stars are 'Just Like Us'--, Nick happily embraces family life. His brother Zack and his own fam (wife and baby girl) only live ten minutes away, which means there are lots of get-togethers and quality time shared.

Two nights prior to our interview, Nick and his wife took the girls to Disneyland's Mickey's Halloween Party, which has become a tradition in their family. "I call it the Disney death march," Nick jokes. "It's like the longest night ever, but its pretty fun." Another honored Hexum tradition is the annual family photo orchestrated by his wife. But it's not the matchy-matchy, cheesy type. "No. No. I would not

go for it," Nick assures me with a smile. "That would get leaked. People would make fun of me." This Thanksgiving, the Hexums returned to the small island off the coast of Florida, near Key West, that Nick once owned. "I went on vacation and just fell in love with this property... It turned out to be a lot of fun, but way too expensive. I just love South Florida and the Keys. Just being out on the water, the climate --it just really clicks. For me, it's either South Florida or Southern California."

Before I wrap up the interview, I ask if there is anything he'd like to add. Without missing a beat, he humbly responds, "I just always want to thank the fans. It's been, like I said, so cool to get to do this for a living and still going strong after all these years --so always gotta give a shout out to the fans. We just try and stay committed to putting on great shows and making exciting, creative new albums and just worry about our fan base... Our hardcore fan base is definitely big enough to sustain us..."

For updates on Nick's upcoming performances with The Nick Hexum Quintet and 311, follow Nick on Twitter @NickHexum. Don't forget to pick up or download *My Shadow Pages* and 311's new album out this spring.

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Brotherly Love

Nick appreciates that The Nick Hexum Quintet has allowed him to employ his recently honed guitar skills, and jam out with his brother, Zack. "He's actually been a really good teacher to me, because he just knows everything about theory, scales, songs, styles," Nick boasts about his bro, who studied music at the University of North Texas and has worked with Michael Bublé. "There's never really been a sibling rivalry... We've always been really close and then now to be able to share the stage and make an album together..."

Because we wanted to know

What are you listening to?

There's probably one playlist that's full of guilty pleasures, pop songs that I would not let anybody look at, but I can use the excuse that it's for my daughters. When we get in the car, Echo's like, "Call Me Maybe! I wanna hear "Call Me Maybe." Styles that I listen to are all over the place. A lot of jazz and funk, stuff from the 60s, 70s, but I love electronic music when I work out... I'm actually really into audio books right now... I'll go through an audio book every three weeks.

Pretty much every music biography that there is: Keith Richards, John Lennon, Paul McCartney. Right now, I'm listening to Hendrix. And not just music ones: Einstein's, Steve Jobs. I love biographies.

Favorite movie?

I used to definitely say gangster movies, the classics: *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, stuff like that. Lately, it's the more absurd movies like: *Adaptation*, *I Heart Huckabees*, *Being John Malkovich*. Those sort of movies that are very weird and outside the norm. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, off beat, thinking comedies.

What has surprised you most in your career?

All the twists and turns. It's not a surprise as much as it's just very encouraging to know that there's always something to be excited about in music. It's a never-ending journey. There are endless sources of inspiration, and that's what's so encouraging about doing *My Shadow Pages*, is that it is a pretty different style than 311. To take a pretty big detour and have it pretty well received and to have the support of all the fans --it's just been really encouraging. It helped me have a rebirth of creativity. It's cool to feel like the possibilities are endless.

Favorite 311 album?

Our first major label album, *Music* (1993), but there are a lot of little gems all over our discography. ML