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When the Red Hot Chili Peppers convened in September 2004 to begin work on their new album, Stadium Arcadium, the idea was "to make an old-fashioned Meet the Beatles-like record," says singer Anthony Kiedis. "We set out to write thirteen songs, make them good and record them -- to have a small, digestible piece of art where people could go, 'Yeah, that's a nice, rocking jam.'" Kiedis pauses. "It went haywire from there."

Kiedis, bassist Flea, guitarist John Frusciante and drummer Chad Smith actually wrote thirty-eight new songs and recorded them all with producer Rick Rubin in the same house, in the Hollywood Hills, where they cut 1991's Blood Sugar Sex Magik. The Chili Peppers were so fired up they wanted to put out the whole racket as a trilogy -- three separate discs, issued in installments. In the end, Stadium Arcadium, coming out May 9th on Warner Bros., will be an album of more common sense and size: a double CD of twenty-five tracks.

Maybe. By mid-February, the band was still mixing and agonizing over which outtakes could be squeezed back onto the album. "A lot of them," says Frusciante. "I could easily give the argument 'This won't make the album any worse. It'll make it better.'" One song Kiedis believes will "insist to get a place on the record" is "Early 80s," which he says is "like Carole King if she wrote a song with Crazy Horse in 1971."

That mad variety and verve sum up the entire album, which Flea bluntly calls "by far the best thing we've ever done. We each have things we do best, and it all got in there." In "C'mon Girl," a Flea-Smith heartbeat-disco rhythm blows up into Kiedis' warrior-metal vocal chorus, then veers into a torrent of Frusciante feedback and harmonics, his homage to Jimi Hendrix's waterfall-guitar drama on Electric Ladyland. "Storm in a Teacup" is power-rock hip-hop with what sounds like Little Richard running wild on piano but is, in fact, Frusciante's pedal-treated guitar. However, that is the real Billy Preston hammering Seventies-funk clavinet on "Warlocks." Preston has been ill in recent years, but when the band sent him a tape of the track, "he got out of bed," Flea says, awestruck, "played and got back in bed."

Stadium Arcadium also reprises the hard-pop and ballad strengths of the Chili Peppers' 1999 and 2002 albums Californication and By the Way, in songs like "Dani California" and "Slow Cheetah," the latter built on a bed of acoustic strum and laced with Frusciante's singing-wire electric guitar. "John is the movement in the music," says Smith. "Something new gets introduced in every chorus or verse, whether it's a backing vocal or a guitar part."

Kiedis seconds the compliment: "In the past, John has taken a less-is-more approach, like the jazz guy who is so good that he can play a couple of notes and it's perfect. But I think he got tired of that. He's heavy, strong and prominent in all of these songs."

Flea, in turn, cites the dramatic turnaround in Kiedis' singing, a concentrated power and tonal focus that Flea admits was not there when he and Kiedis co-founded the Chili Peppers in 1983: "Anthony rapped and yelled and had a unique aesthetic of how lyrics go, but he couldn't sing. When he did a melodic song live, he would tense up. It was difficult for him in a scene where so many guys are great natural singers." But in recent years and especially on Stadium Arcadium, Flea says proudly, "Anthony is bending notes, being flexible with melody, rather than holding on to it for dear life. He's expressing his emotions."

The emotions are real. Several songs on Stadium Arcadium specifically refer to commitment; in "Hard to Concentrate," Kiedis paraphrases the marriage vows ("Do you agree to take this man/ Into your world?"). "During the writing," he explains, "everybody in the band had fallen in love. It's probably the first time we had all fallen in love within

the same few months of each other. I was just tapping into that energy, particularly watching Flea get deeper into a commitment with his girlfriend." They recently had a baby daughter, while Smith and his wife have an eleven-month-old son. Kiedis, ironically, is in limbo: "My relationship at the moment is not where I dreamed it would be. But I have discovered that I have a capacity for commitment beyond anything I've had in the past."

In the meantime, Kiedis is anxious to take the new songs on tour. "We wrote 'em, we've listened to them," he says, "but we haven't given them a life onstage. We're going to do that for the next year" -- once they finish the mixing.

"My son was born the weekend we started recording," says Smith, laughing. "And he's almost walking. Anthony's like, 'Yeah, he'll be tour-managing us by the time this thing comes out.'" (DAVID FRICKE)