

Red Hot Chili Peppers- Funkin' Up The Milky Way

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The Red Hot Chili Peppers defy instability, death and anything else that tries to stop them. Jason Pettigrew cruises the Milky way with Anthony Kiedis and Flea. Portraits of funky milkmen by Lee Locke.

NEW YORK CITY — I leave the rest of the A.P. staff at the hotel while the final schmoozing of the New Music Seminar winds down. I grab my briefcase and head for EMI Records, the East Coast headquarters for the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

As I make my way up the street I notice a large amount of destroyed catering all over the sidewalk. New street-smart architecture in the medium of beer cans and empty fifths piles up. I'd better ask the doorman if I'm at the right place.

"You're going up there?" he asks incredulously, just seconds before a banana-peel-and-egg-white combo slides down the brim of his cap. "You're one sick puppy dog, pal."

I take the elevator to the eighth floor, and as the door opens I see that the once-sterling office decor is marred with spray paint, toilet paper, shaving cream and more strategically tossed food. Nude couples are tossing beer on one another. In fact, there's so much beer on the furniture that every time somebody jumps onto one of the lobby's plush chairs, a fine mist shoots out from all sides. Down the hallway, the noise is deafening, even over the monstrous stereo system, which is playing One Nation Under A Groove.

As I round the corner, I'm bashed in the face by what feels like a planet-sized cantaloupe. Michael Balzary (known to his pals as Flea) is gleaming over target practice.

"You must be the pencil dick from A.P.," he says with a chuckle. "Are you the guy that jerks off to a copy of Field And Stream magazine ?"

"Who told you that ?" I glare at him with one eye while picking seeds out of the other.

"John Lydon," he shoots back while dumping a bowl of vegetable dip over his head. "That is what he told me, and he's never told a lie in his life." The last word is punctuated with a belch.

"Just the issue of Field And Stream his wife is in," I mutter. At this moment a severely distressed EMI publicist is screaming obscenities that would turn Andrew Dice Clay into a crybaby.

"Flea! You !\$@& stupid, arrogant !#@\$#@!'s have destroyed an \$8 million office !"

"So," bemuses Flea. "Let Richard Marx pay for it."

The publicist, covered in what appears to be a combination of mud, cold cream and spaghetti sauce, is about to reach spontaneous combustion. "You %@%#@'s shoved his head down the commode and now I've got three paramedics trying to revive him !"

Flea waxes philosophically. "I find that offensive because with all of his money you would think he would go to a restaurant. At least a McDonald's."

"I will kill you \$#\$&'s , I swear", she screams, running down the hallway.

Flea begins to write the word "poop" on his stomach with the dip. "Stress really is the No. 1 killer, man. C'mon, let's go find Anthony."

A 30-foot descent down the well-partied corridor and a left turn finds Anthony "The Swan" Kiedis being held down by six voluptuous women who are currently redefining the parameters of oral sex. The floor is ankle-deep in foam, aerosol cans, Silly String, salad oil and the dead or near-dead bodies of A&R men, pizza-delivery boys and EMI executives.

"Antoine! Time out for physics class", announces Flea. "Or are you wimping out ?"

"Money talks, my brother", Kiedis calmly replies as he frees himself from legs, breasts, tongues and various other extremities. Once free, he grabs me by the necktie and points me out the window. "You ready, Flea ?"

"What are you doing?!" I shriek, waiting for my bowels to fail me.

"S'no big deal," he explains. "I bet Flea 10 bucks that when you drop two things out of a window, they hit the ground at the same time, regardless of mass." And with that, he throws me out the window.

As I am falling to certain death, I meet up with MTV's Adam Curry. "Adam! How much do you weigh ?"

"One-seventy-five. One forty-nine with a crew-cut... aaaaaarrrrgggh!!!"

Curry becomes a pizza on the sidewalk. I luck out and splash down in a city garbage truck on top of two bums trying to find a meal.

"This is private, asshole," one of them says to me.

"Who are you pathetic turds ?" I retort, my gratitude of being alive short-circuited by these slimeballs.

"I'm feeling hurt since you said that," says the other one.

"Wait a second !" I exclaim. "Aren't you the guys in Figures On A Beach ?"

Dear reader:

If you get anything from this story, let it be this: Things are not what they appear to be. Yes, I know it sounds like Master Po talking to Young Caine in a lost episode of Kung Fu. The scenario described in the above paragraphs obviously did not occur. The EMI putt-putt and free-beer party at Putter's Paradise that was held in the band's honor did not turn into a maelstrom of Rolling Rock and golf balls (although our photo editor was there with his camera, just in case).

What reputations ?

Look, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have put out consistently great records, and it seems that all that they are known for is twisted behavior and a vibrant use of socks. Well, #\$\$%@ that &%#. The band's fourth long-player, Mother's Milk, rocks, throbs, thrashes, kicks, punches and glides, and it will be the record that does everything.

Flea and Anthony are tighter than the proverbial garb's butt. They have guided the band through line-up changes and overcome behemoth obstacles that only a RHCP (Religiously, Heavily Convicted Person) could endure. They never come right out and say it, but throughout the laughs and zany verbal jousting the two of them have big hearts. There aren't socks big enough to cover 'em, either.

A.P.: I've been to a whole bunch of Pepper gigs, and you have always given 200 percent. I've got mangled kneecaps from standing too close to the stage during "Funky Mania."

Anthony: I'd like to say that I get mangled kneecaps from reading your articles.

How do you read them ?

Anthony: With my knees. It's kind of like Braille.

Do you get the same kind of meaning out of them ?

Anthony: Yeah. Not as much as the kneecaps, though.

The story of the funky brothers' cup began some years ago (let's make it 1979) when Hillel Slovak, Jack Irons and Alan Johannes formed a band called Anthem. Hillel urged his pal Flea to learn to play bass and then to join because the band had never had a stable bass player. Anthem turned into What Is This?, and whenever they played out, their good friend Anthony Kiedis used to introduce them.

Anthony: "We had all gone to high school together. Hillel, Jack, Flea and myself and those guys were always in this band that I used to emcee for. I introduced them and gave them some..."

"Color," Flea finishes.

"Whatever. And we started hanging out and getting heavily into funk music, which Grandmaster Flash was at the forefront of at the time. Defunkt was really big in our lives. That band was kind of inspirational in getting the Red Hot Chili Peppers to form. We used to put Defunkt on and go absolutely berserk."

"I don't know if you noticed it," offers Flea, "but the bass line to 'Out In L.A.' is a rip-off of Defunkt. Well, it's not a steal, but more of a feeling."

Not a rip-off - a homage.

"I'd rather feel than steal," Kiedis resigns. "But it was all based on friendship. It was just a matter of us being friends and what a fine idea it would be to have four close friends as bearers of the zany new funk we had in our minds and bodies."

At this point there's much talk of individuals getting out on their own, Flea playing with hardcore aggro-jokers Fear, the shelf life of various L.A. bands and other one-liners that this writer cannot properly record due to EMI Records' air conditioner blowing so hard it threatens to take the office and the three of us to the land of Oz to hang with Dorothy and her posse.

"I'll give it to you straight, real quick," says Flea. "Chili Peppers started as Hillel, Jack, Anthony and Flea. Jack and Hillel were both playing in What Is This?. We started the Peppers first for a joke, and all of a sudden it became - we opened this show for a friend of ours; just one song. It was really fun, and..."

"That's all we played - one song," swears Anthony.

How long was it?

"About three minutes."

"Anyway," Flea continues, "it was really fun, and we started to play more shows and write more songs. Then, all of a sudden, people were starting to take us seriously--management, lawyers trying to get us record contracts and shit."

"And at the same time I said fuck it and quit Fear. It was kind of mutual; they didn't want me, and the Chili Peppers were much closer to my heart. They rejected me."

Adds Kiedis: "And they rejected his bold musical concepts."

Flea: "So, when the Chili Peppers got offered a record contract, What Is This? got offered a record contract. And Jack and Hillel had been playing for at least six years, so what were they supposed to do: Go with the joke band that got a deal after six months, or with the band they dedicated themselves to for six years? So they went with What Is This?, which is completely understandable."

"Although I cried," deadpans Kiedis.

"I didn't cry," says Flea.

"I did. I was emotionally devastated at the time."

Really? (Sometimes I can't tell when these guys are winding me up).

"I cried because I was so happy to finally be in a band and to be strutting my flesh around town, and for my friends to fall out like that... I thought we were over."

"I didn't care," says a matter-of-factly Flea.

The Red Hots' self-titled debut album was released in 1984. The Flea and the Swan hooked up with guitarist Jack Sherman and former Captain Beefheart/13.13 alumnus Cliff Martinez, and the national assault commenced. The album was produced by Andy Gill, the duke-of-dissonance guitarist from the late, great Gang Of Four. Did you ever hear the phrase, "Hindsight is always 20/20?"

"He thought it was necessary to use rhythm machines as our drums because that was what was getting on the radio at the time," explains Kiedis. "He took it that we had to do whatever it took to conform to the sound of the radio."

"That was our first record, and our whole thing was being punk rock about the funk, and we weren't about to compromise our sound, which was based on organic bass and drums. It was a seriously different point of view that we had about going into things. Instead of ending up with a record that was hard-edged funk or namby-pamby pop-funk, we ended up with a record in-between."

"If we had the same sounds that we had on the new album or Uplift Mofu Party Plan or the first record, it would have been infinitely better," surmises Flea. "We didn't have a groove at the time. We had Cliff and Jack at the time, and I don't think that configuration was capable of creating a groove as powerful as what we can do now."

Kiedis chimes in, "The finest recordings we ever did was our first demo tape. Months after we started the band, we did an itsy-bitsy demo tape that captured some of the more intense Red Hot feel. Andy was just too English for us at the time."

Gill has also dismissed his GO4 work as worthless.

Flea: "He said he didn't know what he was doing with those records. That's disheartening because those are great records, but I don't know what he thinks now - I mean, I don't talk to him. I think that what he wanted to do was wrong, but I also think that we were very inexperienced with dealing with anybody in the studio. We knew what we wanted - a raw fucking rocking album. But we didn't know how to go about it and we didn't go about it the right way to try to get what we wanted because we'd just burst in and say, 'We don't like this and we like that BANG!' instead of working with him."

A fond memory from Anthony: "We passed the recording board where he was sitting with our engineer, Dave Jerden. 'We're going to take a shit, Andy,' and he went 'Yeah. Don't trouble me by bringing it back, right?' So Flea and I went and took the shit out of the toilet and brought it back in a pizza box and we gave it to Andy. And all he could say was, 'Typical.'"

Anthony: I had the flu in my pinkie nail once.

How did you get rid of it ?

Anthony: I was in bed for months.

You were in bed with my girlfriend once.

Flea: [Heavily suppressed laughter]

Anthony: [Willing suspension of disbelief] Huh?

You guys went to a party. She had on a beret, blonde hair...

Anthony: What time was this?

The Freaky Styley tour. You played 'Graffiti' and then you went to this party. My girlfriend was there, and you two sat on the bed. I didn't say you fucked or anything.

Flea: You just sat on the bed, Anthony.

Yeah. You talked about how your father was seeing this girl who was on the infamous Rolling Stones Black And Blue billboard.

Anthony: Oh, okay...

When you guys get really, really big, like, within the next four hours, I think I am more qualified to be your official biographer.

Anthony: They're putting up a 300-foot poster of us right now in Times Square, as we are doing this interview.

That's great.

Anthony: It's going over the Fuji board.

Changes of producer, personnel and product marked the eminence of round two, 1985's Freaky Styley. The Peps got the big boss man of funk, George Clinton, to stroke the boards. Slovak, disappointed with the direction of What Is This?, rejoined his amigos.

Styley was truly a schizo record, with funky covers of Sly Stone's "If You Want Me To Stay" and the Meters' "Africa" (re-christened "Hollywood") sandwiched between rocket blasts like "Catholic School Girls Rule," "Black-Eyed Blonde" and the deceptive "Battle Ship" (The real title is "Blowjob Park," but do you think a nice family company like EMI would print that one on one of its album covers?).

The Uplift Mofo Party Plan, released in 1987, was the magic charm thanks to Jack Irons' return. Produced by Michael Beinhorn, the record grooves up and down and all around. From the laid-back "Behind the Sun" to the Zimmerman-in-Detroit rap-up of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" to the power crushing of "Backwoods," the record made it look as if the big-time were just waiting beyond the Hollywood hills.

Then Slovak died of a heroin overdose June 27, 1988, the day before work was to commence on the next record. Irons dropped out soon afterward. The word 'sadness' is a painfully redundant one. A source close to the band used the word 'panic' in describing the Chili Peppers' future.

Anthony: "I don't think 'panic' is really the right word. What it was - all of a sudden our best friend dies, and we were in total emotional dismay and totally discouraged. Then Jack quit because he couldn't face the daily reminder of Hillel's death. We just all freaked out. It wasn't a panic because the most important thing wasn't: 'Well, we've got to get this record out by next year.' It was: 'Let's look at our fucking lives here and see what has to be done so we don't lose another person.'"

"I think we all needed time to gather our bearings. There was never any question whether we wanted to continue with the band, because I think we knew in our hearts that we did, and we always want to be playing as the Red Hot Chili Peppers."

The Peps have had quite a reputation of being some hard-partying guys.

Kiedis is quick to respond: "My own personal view is that the word 'party' is not synonymous with drugs and alcohol. To me,

those words are two different things. And drugs and alcohol - that's one big can of worms right there. I don't know. Drugs and alcohol weren't meant for everybody. And that doesn't mean that everybody wasn't meant for drugs and alcohol. Obviously they weren't meant for Hillel because they killed him. That doesn't mean that the Red Hot Chili Peppers are completely anti-drugs and alcohol. I'm certainly not pro-drugs and alcohol, but it's like to each his reach, and different strokes for different folks.

"I personally do not use drugs, and that's not a direct result of Hillel dying; it's a direct result of how I feel inside when I do those things. I feel better when I don't, and I can't really survive when I do. The rest of the guys in the band aren't drug addicts, but they drink. That's their choice, and it is not a destructive element of their lives. That's pretty much quite simply how it stands.

"Hillel dying is certainly a reminder of what drugs are capable of, and for me, since Hillel and I have some similar personality traits, it is a meaningful reminder. I can say that before I would go back to a life of drugs and alcohol, I would seriously have to consider what happened to my friend and perhaps even through prayer let him know what I was about to do. I would reconsider at that point, which would be good because I can continue going in a positive direction."

Anthony: "We're really happy to have the guys we have now. They're classic Chili Peppers. John is 19, joined the band when he was 18, and has been a fan of the band since he was in diapers. For him this is a dream come true. He's like a rosebud ready to blossom, and Chad has the power of..."

Flea: "Ten elephants."

Anthony: "Ten elephants on a rampage."

Flea: "On steroids."

Anthony: "Chad is 10 elephants on steroids."

Flea: "I just had a good idea for our backstage passes for the next big tour. Not the sticky things but the laminates. They're like joke passes; instead of ACCESS ALL AREAS, have stuff like NO ACCESS BACKSTAGE; DEFINITELY NOT ALLOWED ONSTAGE..."

If you are a major Red Hots maniac, a year ago you would be excused for not knowing who was in your favorite band. MTV's 120 Minutes ran a video of the band playing some club called Alcohol Salad with former Dead Kennedys drummer D.H. Peligro and Blackbird McKnight from the mighty Funkadelic family. Several months later, on some syndicated program called 2HIP4TV, McKnight was replaced by some scrawny kid named John Frusciante, who liked to yell, "Muscle flex!" while everybody piled on top of one another. There were more line-up changes in Peppercorn than there are underwear changes at A.P. Headquarters. And Beinhorn has been the band's longest-lasting producer - he's survived two full records.

So when asked if line-up changes and producer switches might have cost the Peppers some momentum, neither the Flea nor the Swan stumbles around the word-mincing machine.

"That's just conjecture because what happened is what happened, and that is what we've produced," proclaims Kiedis. "It's impossible to speculate as to what would have happened. We've continued to improve and change, and the idea of having a different producer... well, it's given us a variety of records."

"I don't think it hurts, either," adds Flea. "We've made changes, but everything we do is towards the good of making music. I'm sure we've made mistakes and we've done dumb things that were right, and we've made mistakes that we don't even realize were mistakes."

Anthony: "And the line-up thing - that's just the way the ball bounced through our court. I think we've made great use of all the musicians we have played with at all times. We never let it burn us out. We've made the best of each situation, and there were some tough situations, but I think we've done an incredible job keeping this ball rolling. And not crumbling, but picking up steam."

Okay, fair enough. So if you two aren't total and complete bastards to play with, where did everybody go ?

Flea accepts the A.P. challenge: "Okay, let me tell you what happened..."

"No, I'm gonna tell him what happened," Anthony butts in.

Flea perseveres: "No way, uh-uh. I'm telling him."

"Blackbird didn't work out, so we got John," summarizes Flea.

That's it ?

Flea nods.

Anthony ?

"I think that Blackbird is an incredible guitar player - one of the best wandering the globe, but I think the best thing for him was not to be in the Red Hot Chili Peppers, but writing his own music and choreographing his own dance steps.

"It was crazy, but when you get a guy in the band you've got to be prepared to embrace him emotionally for years and years. Very much like being in love and being married. And you have to be willing to accept and tolerate and compromise sometimes and with Blackbird that didn't work out."

Flea perks up: "I've heard some of his home recordings, and they are amazing. I think he could do something great like Blackbird McKnight Experience and it would be one of the greatest bands ever. I wish him the best."

"With D.H., it was tough because we love him as a person and he's a lovable guy, and like everyone else he's got his problems, but I think we hired him on the basis of wanting to work with him," explains the Swan. "He's great to hang out with, he's a wonderful human being, and we wanted a guy that was a friend. That's why we hired him. I think his drumming skills had deteriorated from the time he was at his peak with the DK's, and we really tried to work out the situation."

"I don't think his drumming skills deteriorated as much as he didn't..." Flea pauses. "What he did with the DK's was wild thrashing drumming, and it wasn't tight precision funk drumming, which is what we're all about."

The latest Peppers on the vine are John Frusciante and Chad Smith. Smith used to play for a band called Toby Redd that released one record on an Epic subsidiary and then returned to obscurity. In a field of 30 auditioning drummers, Smith emerged victorious (sans tusks and steroids). Frusciante is a chain-smoking teenage terror on guitar.

"He's a good kid," says Flea. "When he first joined the band, his head got a little swollen and he was running around being rude to girls and stuff and getting them pissed off. But that's to be expected. I mean, shit, when you're 18 years old and you want to get laid really bad and all of a sudden you're in a band, the girls want to fuck. You're bound to go crazy! That's what he's doing, but he's a good person."

"He's really talented and he's very knowledgeable musically. He knows all the shit I don't know. I basically know nothing about music theory, and he's studied it to death, inside out. He's a very disciplined musician - all he cares about is his guitar and his cigarettes."

Okay, you've said that being in a band is like being married...

Anthony: It's like a four-way butt fuck. It's like you're constantly linked as a four-way butt fuck.

What does Flea do to piss you off?

Anthony: Flea? Hmm, marriage counselor, huh?

Flea: We don't want to get into that, 'cause we start arguing on the spot.

"What pisses me off about Flea," begins Anthony, "is that I really hate the fact that he's such a great fucking bass player. It's probably the most captive style known to mankind, and that really bugs me. The fact that we've been friends since we were 15 years old gets on my nerves. It's not a good situation. It pisses me off - all the good times we've had - day in, day out, city to city, country to country, playing music to thousands of screaming people..."

"Hey, fuck you, man!" defends Flea, helping his pal play "Wind The Writer Up" (deluxe home-game edition now on sale).

"The things that really bother me about Anthony are that we've created something together that's like... Me and my wife have created a daughter, and Anthony and I have created a piece of art. Obviously, it hasn't been just the two of us, but we've created something truly unique, and I think it will go down in musical history. The next time they write a rock-history book, they're going to have to give us some mention."

"We've done something that has influenced a younger generation of musicians. I could take my bass playing and musical ideas and it wouldn't mean shit without the concept and the energy that happens when Anthony and I get together."

"Fuck you, Flea!"

So I guess this means your solo record on Windham Hill is on hold right now.

"[Laughter] Yeah! It's a certain thing that we share that could never be replaced by anything."

C'mon, you guys! Is that it? No dirt, no filth?

Anthony: Flea has given me herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis, AIDS... common cold of the cock...

Flea: [Very softly] I just don't like it when he comes just before I come.

Anthony: I wish Flea would wipe more often.

I'm not drinking out of any of your glasses today.

Flea has brought up an interesting point. I don't think there isn't a band around that can insist that they've never been touched by some sphere of influence. Go ahead - name one.

So, tell me, guys, ever heard of a record called Harder Than You by 24-7 Spyz ?

Flea: I think there's a definite Chili Peppers influence there, as well as a Fishbone influence.

"Definitely a Bad Brains influence," stresses Anthony.

"Yes!" agrees Flea. "I think a lot of bands start in different ways. That doesn't mean that those guys are in a bad band, because I think they have something that is just 24-7 Spyz. I think they're just starting out and that they're influenced by bands, and, I mean, imitation is the best form of flattery."

No bad vibes from **Anthony:** "That's the best way to take it, too. For instance, Living Colour to me sounds nothing like the Red Hot Chili Peppers. But I have to deal with on a daily basis [imitates young geek type]: 'Wow! Living Colour's really biting your style, Swan. Y'ever see the guy onstage? He moves just like you.'"

Living Colour ? Have the people who say that ever heard your records ?

"They probably never have! They're talking about the way he jumps around or whatever."

Flea's pretty calm about da Spyz. "We can be negative about it and get pissed, or just be happy for people, y'know? Power to 'em! They're in a position to do something. They sound like a lot of people right now, but I think they can grow."

"It would be a bummer if that record became huge and they were hailed as innovators; then, obviously, there would be some anger going around. Power to them, though - they're playing organic music, and they are happening."

"I think one thing," adds the Swan, "that the Red Hots were instrumental in creating a combination of a few different styles into one band. I think we did a pretty excellent job of combining hardcore, rock and rap into our own little stew. That's something the Spyz have as one of their qualities, and that's why people compare them to us. It's a compliment, not a dis, that they emulate aspects of the Red Hots."

"I second that emotion," doth sayeth the Flea. "Power to the Spyz."

"The Spyz are nice guys," echoes the Swan.

I didn't see your first Pittsburgh gig at the Decade...

Anthony: That was our greatest Pittsburgh show ever.

That's what I heard. The guy that was doing the tour told me it was the best one. I think his name was Ben...

Flea: [Whines] Beeeeennn! He was so mad at us !

Are you kidding?

Flea: He told us that we would never be able to tour again if we kept doing live shows like that. [To Anthony] Remember the big talking-to we got ? What we did was we played our show and then we went off... Anthony got this 80-pound bag of popcorn and brought a hatchet out and mutilated it and threw it all over the place. We stayed up there and did a two-hour comedy act.

Yeah, he told me it was great. I couldn't go because my girlfriend [to Anthony], the one you were in bed with, wasn't old enough to get in.

Flea: Was he in bed fondling her tits, or...

Just sitting on the bed being nice. Then again...

Anthony: Sure I didn't sneak off with her?

We talked about the great music coming out of L.A., with the two of them citing Fishbone, Firehose, N.W.A. and Thelonus Monk as favorites. When asked who sucks, the immediate response was, "Warrant!"

There was much talk of worthless glam bands. Anthony and I swapped sunglasses; his were cool and stylish lenses with red trim, and mine were typical tourist tack-plastic Statue Of Liberty spikes. We traded back and Flea wore mine. Anthony was late for another interview and had to scat.

The reason for the fond recollections is to accentuate the facts (and we all know how important facts are, especially in North Carolina). Anthony Kiedis and Flea Balzary aren't superhuman. They're super humans.

Yeah, we had some wacky moments during our conversation, but we had some dead serious ones, too. It's the kind of thing you don't get to see or hear when the band is burnin' on stage or climbing up the walls of video sets or walking across Abbey Road with those socks in tow. They are not on a star trip. It's too bad that everybody seems to get the "on" side, a paradox that Papa Flea understands.

"I have a 10-month-old daughter. I don't think I'm any less maniacal now - I just like to spend time with my wife and kid. I love them both very much."

"Yeah, I really don't know. I mean, there's definitely a thing where I know, 'Okay, we're gonna be filming MTV tomorrow,' and I'm going to have to turn on my juice. I'm not going to sit around and talk about my baby's sixth tooth. Well, actually I might discuss that!"

"There's different times and different places for everything, y'know? I'm in show business - what I do for a living is, I entertain. When it's time for me to entertain, I entertain. The only thing I think it might have cost us is that we've definitely offended a lot of people in our time."

"The only thing that bugs me is that people... Okay, we have this reputation for being these nutty guys with socks on their dicks, and people don't pay attention to the music we're playing, which I think is substantial and valid. Everything that goes around comes around, and I think that all the energy we've put out has got to go somewhere."

While Anthony and I were discussing Hillel, you remained silent as though it still bothered you to acknowledge it.

"Well, when Hillel died it was a very sad thing. It's really sad to lose someone that I loved so much and shared so many great times with. I mean, the guy taught me how to play the bass, y'know ?"

"I feel sad that during the last year of his life we didn't get along very well because of problems he had and problems I had - we weren't getting along very well, but everybody has periods in their relationships like that. And I wished I could have told him before he died. It's just really that I miss him. I didn't realize how much I would miss him until recently. At first it was shock, then it was sadness, and now I just miss him.

"I wish he could see some of the things that I'm doing. I wish he could see my daughter. When my wife was pregnant, he was really into it, and it was one of the last things we got along about. He always said it was going to be a girl. More than anything else, he was so into that. And I really wish he could see her. I'll never have the chance to share anything with him again - that's the worst thing."

Our time is winding down, and if I expect the powers that be to buy me dinner, I had better hop. Flea's a bit tired, but not too tired to crank out a few bars of Thelonus Monk's "Bemsha Swing" on the slightly out-of-tune piano in the office we've been in for the past few hours. I ask him if he wants to do a Richard Nixon impersonation to make anything perfectly clear.

"I would have voted for Jesse Jackson if I were an American citizen."

I laugh, thinking he's winding me up again. He's not smiling.

"I'm from Australia. I moved when I was five years old. I thought everyone knew that."

"Basically, it would be good for everyone to know that we've been through a lot of shit, but we're stronger than ever. We sound better than we ever have live. Right now we're really explosive. Right now we are going to be touring excessively and extensively with no mercy. We're coming to your town, and we're gonna rock."

Okay, I'll make this the last question: Is that a threat or a promise ?

Flea looks me straight in the eye, tweaks his goatee, smiles and says, "That's a promise and a threat."