

Red Hot Chili Peppers- Funky Monks

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Every year thousands of young Americans make the pilgrimage to the Beatles' hometown of Liverpool to see a tiny bronze statue entitled "Four Young Men Who Shook The World". And not far away, four young men are shaking. Accustomed to the warm glow of the Southern Californian sun, the world's favourite punk/funk group is freezing in a dark, dank, Liverpool waterside flat. At times like this, it's ironic they call themselves the Red Hot Chili Peppers. For the past month, the Peppers have been touring Europe to sold-out crowds, but like a California cactus, they wither when removed from the smog and heat of their native San Fernando valley. "You know, today's my 22nd birthday" says guitarist John Frusciante, his voice quavering. Young Frusciante is taking it hard. Unflappable Flea, bassist and countercultural icon, is suffering in stride. "Germany is the worst, the country is gray and so are the people," he moans. "Belfast, on the other hand, was pretty intense - there's all these military checkpoints to protect against IRA suicide bombers. It was the best crowd I've ever played for, because the audience was so hungry. When I really want to go home, I tell myself that I'm helping people. In Belfast you really feel wanted."

The road is traditionally where the Peppers cook, but after cutting 90 minutes of their best music with mega-producer Rick Rubin last year, they are eager to get back home and do it again. Blood Sugar Sex Magik was the product of a five week, 20 hour a day recording session in a reportedly haunted mansion in the Hollywood Hills.

The foursome were always a tight group of guys, but the BSSM sessions have changed the way the band thinks and makes music. As always, the tattooed forces behind the Peppers' much imitated sound are Flea and frontman Anthony Kiedis. But four years after replacing founding guitarist Hillel Slovak, who died of a heroin overdose in 1988, John Frusciante has emerged as a rhythm maker formidable enough to drop Steve Cropper to his arthritic knees. Frusciante cleans up his out-of-phase tone on BSSM, and lays down nearly 90 minutes of uninterrupted funk groove - simple and strong. Without sounding derivative, his leads conjure an all-star cast of living guitar ghosts: Neil Young, Mahavishnu John, Robbie Robertson, Jimmy Page and Adrian Belew. Conversely, Flea has toned down his mofo, grab 'em by the throat bass lines, giving Frusciante enough space to call his own shots. The result is a four and six string collaboration that blurs the line between the musicians and their instruments. Talk to Flea and Frusciante about their gear, and they'll tell you that their instruments are mere extensions of their sock-draped body parts. Ask about the band, and they'll say it's a funnel, into which they pour the thousands of albums they've ever heard, their love for each other and, of course, their collective sex drive. Call it a lesson in Zen and the Art of Rhythm Maintenance.

GUITAR SCHOOL: Happy Birthday John.

JOHN FRUSCIANTE: Thanks.

GS: How does it feel being on the road?

JF: I don't feel so good right now; we had a bad day yesterday, travelling in from Milan. Right now, all I want is to go home, hang out with my girlfriend and play clarinet.

GS: Clarinet?

JF: I don't play guitar unless I'm on stage. I play clarinet now. I'm much more serious about it than the guitar, to be honest. Right now I'm trying to figure out how to put the notes together, and how to make them wide and deep. I try not to make conscious decisions on either instrument - I just play. Every time I pick up an instrument, I don't know what's going to happen.

FLEA: I started playing trumpet when I was 11 years old.

GS: How good are you?

F: I'll show you. Wait a second, let me get it. [Pause. Some banging around] This is by Ted Cameron - it's called "If You Could See Me Now" [Plays a very smooth melodic trumpet line for about a minute]

GS: That's nice. Do you and John ever play together?

F: No, not yet; maybe when we get back home. He like to do it by himself right now; it's a private thing for him. But I've heard him play, and I think he's really good. Very free, very open.

GS: Have you ever tried playing the trumpet on stage?

F: I've never played trumpet with the Chili Peppers. I did play a little with a band called Thelonious Monster. It was always my dream to be a great jazz trumpet player. It still is.

GS: Are there any similarities between the trumpet and the bass?

F: Yes. They are both musical instruments.

GS: What other musical instruments did you take to Europe?

JF: Three Strats. Some people think they need all these racks and stuff, but I don't have any. I play on Marshall heads, so they sound different every night. I don't actually change any of the knobs myself, so I don't know exactly how they're set. I just play until I get a certain feel. Sometimes there's a wah-wah or fuzz tone, but mostly I play straight through a Marshall.

F: I'm using a MusicMan with a Galien Krueger head and Mesa/Boogie cabinets. They're loud.

GS: The new album seems less cluttered than your previous efforts - you can really hear each individual instrument doing its own thing.

F: Actually I haven't heard that record in about a year, but I remember trying to play very simply. In the past, I've played some things just to be a bitchin' player, but that wasn't the overall attitude this time around.

JF: I played with a much cleaner guitar sound on this record; I don't have that many reasons to play dirty anymore. When you want to play heavy, you got to play dirty, but the clean sound is the natural sound. Personally, my favourite guitar sound is straight into a four track - straight into the board. Does that sound right? I'm not feeling very smart today.

GS: Compared to touring, making the record must've felt like being in the womb. I heard you locked yourselves in

a haunted mansion and jammed all day and all night. That kind of reminded me of Dylan and the Band's 'The Basement Tapes'.

F: It was a very peaceful time.

JF: "Womb" is a very good word. We didn't ever leave the place - you just woke up, relaxed, took a few deep breaths, put a grape in your ear and started making music. Very easy. Very beautiful. Concentrating on doing nothing. I don't really care about my own creativity. I didn't even pay attention to my own playing. I just care about my life. I wasn't even listening to the guitar or how I was making it sound during the recording sessions. I just enjoy playing music with people I love. You don't pay attention to what you're playing, you just look into the other guy's eyes, or at his hands, or his knee, or whatever.

F: Jamming well has a lot to do with your understanding of humanity. It also takes hard work and dedication. I think we had been stagnating; getting together in that kind of environment loosened things up. Touring saps me physically, but not musically. You don't usually realise when it's happening, but the road makes you a better musician, and much more accustomed to playing all the time and thinking on your feet. Last night, I found myself playing these simple, elegant bass lines. It was surprising. I just built a rehearsal studio in my house. I can't wait to get back and just jam when I want to - it's been a dream of mine.

GS: Who do you want to play with?

F: Everybody. I play with Steven Perkins, the drummer from Jane's Addiction. I just finished working on Roger Water's new record. I even got a call from Jeff Beck's people. They asked me if I wanted to work on his new album. I was really into it, but then I found out that he's going into the studio the day we go back on the road. I had to say no.

GS: Were you disappointed?

F: Yeah. I really think I could light a fire under his ass. It's not that he's an old fart or anything, I just think I could really shake things up.

GS: Who shakes you up?

F: A lot of people. Hillel really did. He got me to play the bass when we were in high school together. We had some incredible jams - we were the only two people in the world who could share that. It will never happen again.

GS: When people close to me die, I can remember conversations I had with them word for word. Can you recall, note for note, musical conversations you had with Hillel?

F: Absolutely. I remember the tone and texture of those conversations and they play sometimes still inhabit me when I play. That's when I let things be natural.

GS: To John, was joining the band after Hillel died the fulfillment of a life long dream?

JF: No. The only dream or goal I have is to have a family, that sort of thing.

GS: So what does being a Chili Pepper mean to you?

JF: Making music with people I love, and making records. I've always believed that music is something that can't be expressed using words. I remember being at a baseball game when I was a kid. I was trying to play, and failing miserably, as usual. I was very angry and frustrated, so I just stood in the outfield and wrote a song in my head. Then I went home and filled a whole side of a tape with songs I made up. I was very angry back then. I don't need to express those kinds of emotions now, but I'm still a firm believer that music isn't something you can express with words.

GS: It's pretty obvious you guys listen to just about everything. You both must have an enormous number of albums.

F: We have like six tapes we've been listening to on this tour: Miles Davis' "Porgy And Bess", a Muddy Waters compilation, a Velvet Underground, Black Flag's "Damaged", an Echo and The Bunnymen, and one I can't remember. Miles Davis is just unbelievable. You listen to 'Kind Of Blue', and you hear all you'll ever have to. That was one of the first records I ever bought. I wore it out and replaced it.

JF: I have the biggest CD collection of anybody I know - probably a couple of thousand or more. Listening to my collection is all I ever really want to do. That and read. I just got through listening to Charles Mingus' "Oh Yeah"; it's the one where he plays piano and just screams his ass off.

GS: Is Mingus an influence?

JF: He must be, considering he was probably the only man ever to have sex with 23 women in one night. [Laughs] I just read that in his biography.

GS: By the way, do you get naked on the tour?

JF: Whenever the mood strikes. It's nothing you plan, or predict, or anything like that. It just sort of happens. You have to be free. That's what getting naked is about - opening your mind and playing with people you love."

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