

BASS PLAYER, FEVRIER 96

FROM THE VAULT: FLEA STARTS FROM SCRATCH par Scott Malandrone

He can't take it. Flea, red-hot bassist for the Chili Peppers, is in desperate need of a fix. After 27 hours on an airplane, it seems the Guru of Groove is having big-time bass withdrawal. "Sorry, man - I just got to Australia and I haven't played yet," he says. Flea grabs his Alembic Epic and thwacks a few funky notes to curb his urges. The animated bassist is chilling out at "Cuttlefish Castle," his sprawling beach-front retreat in the wilds of New South Wales. Like its owner, the home's decor is, well, unique: bright red, green, blue, and brown walls surround elegant wooden floors, while a copper, brass, and wrought-iron spiral staircase ascends upward from the middle of the ocean-view room. Out back, a basketball court sits dormant at the foot of a dense forest. "This is a great place to hang out," says Flea. "I just wish it weren't so far away."

With the bass still in his lap, Flea makes a jaw-dropping statement: "I'd be surprised if bass players are into our new record," he says. He ponders the remark for a second and adds, "*One Hot Minute* is just a bunch of rock songs. They're great, but I think someone who reads Bass Player would be much more into a guy like Michael Manning."

Don't let Flea's humbleness fool you. Judging by the fact that BP readers have named him Best Funk Bassist for three years in a row - and that he's always been in the top ten in the voting for Bassist Of The Year - it appears he's still connecting. Few have inspired more post-P-Funk bass grooves than Flea, and his band's latest funk/chunk offering should send many more young thumbs into overdrive. Produced by Rick Rubin, *One Hot Minute* is the follow-up to the band's multi-platinum smash *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*. No other Chili Peppers record has displayed more dimension or emotion than this one, which was written in Hawaii and recorded in Los Angeles. The addition of ex-Jane's Addiction axeslinger Dave Navarro, who replaces John Frusciante, has something to do with it: he brings a heavier, more textured guitar style to the Peppers' party - but it's Flea's bass that guides the project. His parts are as streamlined as the ones on *Blood Sugar* but also display a newfound melodic depth and powerful presence. The lofty float of "Aeroplane", the smooth stride of "Walkabout," and the wiry bass solo on "Coffee Shop" illustrate Flea's commanding-yet-essential approach. At 33, he's grown beyond the psycho-slap style that made him legendary among 4-string funkateers, and he now insists the song is his #1 priority. "I've put less emphasis on the bass," he says. "I'm trying to improve as a songwriter as well."

During a two-week break from the band's grueling tour schedule, the "bassopotamus" took some time to explain why he's fallen back in love with his instrument after recording six albums, how not to be a player who's "all flash and no smash," and why practicing Transcendental Meditation has helped him to become a better musician. Flea... *meditating?*

Compared to the full-bore thumbwork of early Chili Peppers records, your parts on Blood Sugar Sex Magik showcased a more stripped-down, rudimentary approach. On One Hot Minute, did you try to combine elements of both ?

Not on a conscious level. I was trying to play simply on *Blood Sugar* because I had been playing too much prior to that, so I thought, I've really got to chill out and play half as many notes. When you play less, it's more exciting - there's more room for everything. If I do play something busy, it stands out, instead of the bass being a constant onslaught of notes. Space is good.

I think my playing on *One Hot Minute* is even more simple; I just wanted to play shit that sounded good. I thrashed through the recording and didn't care about the parts being perfect. It's not that I don't love the bass passionately anymore - I just felt I'd been getting too many accolades for being "Joe Bass Player."

So the simpler approach is a reaction to all the recognition you've received ?

That, plus the whole concept of being a jack-off musician and not thinking about the big picture. I do consider myself fortunate to have achieved popularity as a bassist, but I felt there was too much emphasis being placed on playing technique, as opposed to just playing music. So before we recorded this album, I spent more time strumming an acoustic guitar than I did playing bass. To me, my bass parts are more incidental to the song now, because I'm thinking less as a bass player and more as a songwriter.

Some might argue that this record is one of your stronger bass efforts.

Really? Maybe not thinking about it made me play better. I definitely left lots of mistakes on there, and I can't even think of anything I played that was complex; even the slapping stuff is simple. It's original-sounding, and I'm proud of that - but what I played was more a matter of aesthetic choice. On the other hand, I guess "Giant Steps" was simple to [saxophonist] John Coltrane, because it was him playing it. It's easy if you can do it! [Laughs.]

Overall, how do you think One Hot Minute differs from Blood Sugar Sex Magik ?

There are two big differences. First, I was in a different place emotionally for this record. I was coming out of a two-year period of misery, when I was down emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Second, Dave Navarro is intensely different from John Frusciante. When we recorded *Blood Sugar*, John played all his tracks once and maybe overdubbed a few solos, so the whole record was very spontaneous. Dave is really into the studio; he would spend weeks on every song, put something like 15 tracks of guitar on every tune, and weed through it in the mix. Dave's sound is more layered and "effecty" than John's, which was like, *boom*-play it dry and leave it alone.

Also, Dave and I are very different musically. He'll often play some '70s rock song, and most of the time I don't even know who did it, but I'll start playing along - and to me it's ridiculous. But our differences create our music.

So the contrast between your styles created the album's textured sound ?

The contrast made a big difference. John was a huge fan of the band when he joined, so it wasn't a big change for us. He did come into his own aesthetic as time went on, and he had a huge amount to do with the sound of the band, but Dave's coming from his own trip - the Jane's Addiction thing in particular, which was very different from the Chili Peppers.

Did adjusting to yet another guitar player affect the feel ?

It had its ups and downs. We were playing something new, and it was exciting - but on the negative side, we'd never toured together. The record is what it is, though: a document of that time. It has good energy, the grooves are good, and the music is good; I'm happy with the way I played, but I'm already onto another groove.

The band's jams seem to be stretching out into new areas.

To me, this is the *least* jam-oriented record we've made. I mean, we definitely jammed on the ideas, but there's only one groove on the whole album that came from a jam, "Deep Kick." The rest of it came from my sitting down with a guitar or bass and saying, "Check this out, guys." I wrote almost all of the music on the record.

So you've expanded beyond writing only grooves ?

I've always had a major hand in writing, but on some of the *One Hot Minute* songs, I wrote the chords and the melody and most of the words. I wrote a lot of the lyrics on "Deep Kick" and "Transcending," for example.

Did you put the songs together on a 4-track ?

I've got one, but mostly I'd play acoustic guitar and come up with the chords and melody, and Dave would take my simple guitar part and play it in his magical Navarro way. Or, I would have a bass line, and Dave would think of a guitar part to go with it.

When did you start learning to play guitar ?

I started a couple of months before we began making this record. Rick Rubin gave me a Martin acoustic, and I bought a Neil Young songbook to learn chords. Playing guitar has definitely helped me as a songwriter; instead of thinking in terms of bass lines and grooves, which is an amazing way to think, I now think about chord progressions and melodies. It's another musical dimension for me.

Do you think bass players make good songwriters because they think of the groove instead of just chords ?

A good songwriter is someone who has something interesting to say, period. I've heard great songs from people who could barely string together a couple of chords, and I've heard shitty music come from world-renowned virtuosos. Obviously, more good music comes out of good musicians - but I think being a good songwriter requires being in touch with all the emotions and stuff that are flying through the air around you.

What's your opinion of the role of the bass ?

It's difficult to generalize, but I like hearing the bass when it's really locking in with the drums. I like it simple. I like it when it makes you want to fuck - that warm, good feeling. Very seldom do I enjoy bass playing that takes center stage; even on a funk song where the bass is the focus, such as Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep" [*Uncle Jam Wants You*, Priority], it's just a funky groove - it's not "Look at me." Plenty of bass players have fancy chops, but they don't make you feel any emotions. You don't feel anger, fear, or love. That's what I call "all flash and no smash," a phrase I got from Lonnie Marshall of the band Weapon Of Choice. Lonnie's one of the funkier bass players alive today - I've *totally* copped stuff off him.

So what's your function as the Chili Peppers bassist ?

My position goes beyond that of just a bass player; I also consider myself an entertainer. As a bassist, my job is to *kick ass*. When I pick up my bass and play with the band, it's time to get serious. It's my job to give my all every time I play, no matter how I feel. But I also buy into the show-biz aesthetic of giving a dazzling performance, and I'm into putting on a show.

Does the entertainer side of your job ever interfere with the bass-playing side ?

No. Standing in one place and playing isn't what the Red Hot Chili Peppers are about - it's about being the wildest rock band on earth. People buy tickets to see us play, and I'm into entertaining them. I think as much about dancing and being bizarre as I do about playing well. I'm not saying that to do a good show you have to jump around and do an avant-garde dance while spinning on your head - but no one would have liked Charlie Chaplin if he hadn't fallen on his face every once in a while! [*Laughs.*]

Does the punk-rock concept of "play every note like it's your last" still apply to what you do ?

Definitely. Punk rock changed my life. As for punk rock *music*, though, I don't think it exists anymore.

So you wouldn't categorize bands such as Green Day punk ?

No. I like Green Day, but they're more like an oldies pop band. Punk-rock music ended with the Germs, but punk rock as an attitude hasn't. That means spitting in the face of convention and doing your own thing that's "anti"- anti the bloated, corporate, boring, heard-it-a-billion-times-before bullshit. The bands that did it well were playing some of the most innovative, exciting music of their time - but now, it's about playing fun music and having a good time. That's cool, but it's not punk.

You've said that most of your influences tend to be more emotional than technical. Are there any incidents besides experiencing punk rock that had a big impact on you ?

Seeing my stepdad play upright bass in our living room when I was eight had a *huge* influence on me. I'd watch him and his friends play hardcore bebop, which to me is one of the highest forms of expression - intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and technically; America has come up with nothing better than bebop. Seeing them play filled me with this incredible feeling of joy I'd never experienced before.

Meeting [Chili Peppers singer] Anthony Kiedis in high school had a lot to do with how I ended up as a musician. He was the first kid I met who didn't give a shit about being like anybody else. The way he talked, the way he dressed, and the way he acted had a big influence on me. He was so *anti*; he thought anyone who tried to be like anyone else was lame.

Also, taking acid was a big thing for me as a youngster. I don't recommend drugs to anyone, but I can't deny that I did them. Anthony and I would sit and listen to Eric Dolphy play "God Bless the Child" [*Here & There*, Prestige] on the bass clarinet over and over again, for about five hours! How could I not be deeply affected by that? I couldn't believe a human being was making that noise ! There's nothing more amazing than a human creating that energy through an instrument; I've never reached that level, because I'm just not studied enough in music to do something as amazing as Eric Dolphy did.

The thing that's changed me even more recently is having realized the importance of becoming a loving person: someone who thinks, What can I give ? rather than, What am I going to get ?

Has that developed from being a father ?

Being a dad is definitely part of it. It also comes from becoming a more aware person. I was stoned every day of my life for 15 years, which I don't regret. I've done a lot of shitty things to myself, but everything's for a reason - so if I can be more aware of what's going on around me, then I'm going to be a better person and a better musician.

Now, I meditate every day. It means so much to sit and be *quiet*. I just feel what's going on inside myself, and it's helped me to be more in touch with my feelings - with my purest level of expression. It also helps me to remove the blocks between my heart and my brain so I'm able to express myself and not be worried about some stupid bullshit.

Right now, I'm very eager to learn; I haven't had that feeling for quite a while. I've had that hunger for music as a whole, but not for the bass as an instrument. After we play a gig nowadays, I go back to my hotel room and play even more. I'm trying to figure out new sounds and get my hands and mind to be coordinated in a beautiful, flowing way. My dynamic has changed - I really want to improve as a bass player.

What have you been practicing ?

I'm jamming on grooves and bass lines and trying to find new ones. Also, I'm going to start learning stuff off records to get new perspectives, which is something I've rarely done. I've always played by improvising with myself.

Are you working on learning any theory ?

No, but I need to. A friend of mine, a great upright bassist named Hilliard Green, was talking to me about theory. The way he explains it, there are certain things very easily within my grasp; I just need to spend some time to figure them out. My music is based mostly on intuition and instinct, but I could go further with a better understanding of theory.

Since you trust your instincts, are you afraid of being affected negatively by learning theory ?

No - I'm a punk rocker, so it can't hurt me ! [*Laughs.*] I'd love to walk into a room and be able to play with [saxophonist] Wayne Shorter and [pianist] McCoy Tyner - that would be *beautiful*. I feel I could play well in any rock, reggae, funk, or African band in the world, but jazz... that's intense ! I *feel* jazz, but I just don't know enough about theory to play it.

There are a bunch of different styles mixed together in the bass line of "Aeroplane." How did you come up with the slap part in the verses ?

I was sitting in my garage with a bass Louis Johnson gave me - a Treker Louis Johnson Signature 4-string - and I started playing that '70s funk line. The bass had light strings on it and had that *whacka-whackita* sound. It's kind of a "been done" groove, but it's nice and Anthony liked it. The chorus part was one of those things where we were stuck; sometimes when we're looking for another part, I'll have no idea what I'm going to do, but I'll say, "What about this?" I went [*mimics zooming sound up neck*]; it's all sliding on the E string.

Actually, "Aeroplane" was the only song I was worried about - I thought it sounded like another stupid white boy trying to be funky! [*Laughs.*] I put it out anyway, but it's the one thing I'd go back and fix. When I played it live in the studio with the band, the bass didn't record right for some reason, so it was one of the few things I had to overdub. The part kept feeling stiff to me, as if it wasn't my day; I wasn't flowing with the drums. I wanted to redo it, but Rick said, "It's cool."

"Coffee Shop" is chock full of bass stuff, including a solo.

It's funny - "Coffee Shop" would never have been a song if it weren't for this effect called the [Electro-Harmonix] BassBalls. I started playing with it one morning in Hawaii, and it had the most amazing underwater, Bootsy kind of sound - and it also had this siren effect going on. But when we got to L.A. to start recording, the box never made the sound again. I got so mad, I crushed it! I almost didn't even want to record the song, because to me, it was all about that bass sound. I ended up using a Boss Dynamic Filter on the record.

In the solo, it sounds as if you're ripping the strings off the fingerboard.

We didn't know what to do at the end, so I said, "I'll solo." I played the track once, and I wanted to fix it later because I thought it sucked, but I never did.

"Pea," your bass-and-vocals solo piece, features an acoustic bass guitar.

Yeah - it's a Sigma acoustic. There's not much to say about "Pea". I mean, it's just a song I wrote.

Are you catching any flack for it ?

Because I say, "Homophobic redneck dick"? I did get some shit for it, but fuck those people ! We had to put out a version of the album for Wal-Mart without that song.

Did that upset you at all ?

No. I mean, if someone says, "I'm not going to buy your record, but I'll buy *these* songs," then okay -buy those songs. I'd rather they hear it all, but to hell with my ego.

The ending of "One Big Mob" has a heavy feel.

That song was actually part of a 12-minute movement. The end was the intro to another song called "Stretch You Out," which is more of a funk thing, but we didn't put it on the record. It's too bad, because bass players would probably like that tune more than any other song on the album. I think we'll put it out as a B-side.

"Walkabout" is built around the bass, especially the verses.

I had gone to see the Spike Lee movie *Crooklyn*, which has this cool '70s funk soundtrack. I came home, picked up my bass, and started playing that verse line. I wrote the intro at rehearsal - it was another one of those "What about this?" things.

"Transcending" centers around a twisted b7 bass riff.

I play the root and the b7, which ring at the same time, and then I play the 4th and bend it up while I keep plucking. I wrote that part on my acoustic bass guitar while I was sitting on the beach in Hawaii, before I decided we should all write there.

Did you use an Ernie Ball Music Man StingRay on the album ?

I may have played a StingRay on "Aeroplane," but I used an Alembic for most of the record. [*Ed. Note: According to Alembic, Flea's bass is a stock Epic 4-string with a mahogany body, flame-maple top, and a three-piece maple neck with an ebony fingerboard.*]

Did the Alembic make you play differently than the Music Man ?

Maybe. It was the bass I had in the studio, so I was like, "Let's record, let's rock." The Alembic isn't as in-my-face as the Music Man, but the high notes are as loud as the low ones, from the bottom of the neck to the top, which is a problem on the Music Man. I probably could have used the StingRay for the entire album, but when we go to record, I always think I need the best bass for recording.

Did you use your G-K amp and MESA/Boogie speakers ?

Yeah - an 800RB head with a MESA/Boogie 2x15; I like the way they sound together. I'm not picky when it comes to equipment, but I like it to sound good and to work right. I've tried a bunch of different stuff, but I haven't found anything else as good.

How did you get that ultra-slimy sound on "Falling Into Grace" ?

It's the BassBalls, the Boss Dynamic Filter, and maybe a Boss Auto Wah, too. I had all three hooked up, but I may have used only two of them.

You also played on Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" [Jagged Little Pill]. How did you come up with that funky fingerstyle line ?

It was very instinctive - I showed up, rocked out, and split. When I first heard the track, it had a different bassist and guitarist on it; I listened to the bass line and thought: "That's some weak shit!" [*Laughs.*] It was no flash *and* no smash ! But the vocal was strong, so I just tried to play something good.

Was the Alanis cut the most successful side project you've done ?

I also played on "Bust a Move" by Young M.C. [*Stone Cold Rhymin'*], which was a #1 hit. I have a bitter taste in my mouth about that, though, because I feel as though I got ripped off. The bass line I wrote ended up being a major melody of the tune, and I felt I deserved songwriting credit and money because it was a #1 hit. They sold millions of records, and I got \$200! Afterwards, my lawyer told them, "You should throw down Flea some

cash," but the record company said, "We told him *exactly* what to play." No one was even in the room at the time but me and the engineer! It was ridiculous, but I learned from it.

Have you played on any other records ?

Not that many, but probably my favorite is an album by Cheikha Rimitti called *Sidi Mansour*. She sings so beautifully. It's rhyme and traditional North African music mixed with me on bass, Robert Fripp on guitar, and the Dead Kennedys' East Bay Ray on guitar. The songs are kind of tribalish grooves, and I'm playing funky bass over percussion and microtonal flute.

Have you ever considered doing a solo disc ?

Yes, but it won't be a solo-bass record; the bass will just play the bass lines in the songs. I'm not saying the melody can't be featured on the bass, but I think if a song is about the bass guitar, it'll revolve around a beautiful line with things layered on top of it - kind of a sexy dub type of thing. I'm also going to make a record with my friend John Lurie, who's the sax player from the Lounge Lizards.

Has your daughter shown any interest in music ?

Clara's already a great drummer. I realized it for the first time while we were in London recently; she's six years old, and she got up behind the drum set and started playing *boom, pop, boom boom, pop*, and I was like, "Where did *that* come from" ? I started playing along with her [*sings funky bass line*], and she was right on the groove! I have a drum kit at home, but now I might get her a little set of her own.

What advice would you offer to Clara about playing music ?

My only advice is to do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt yourself or anybody else. I would hope she would have the love and self-esteem to make her craft interesting and do something beautiful. In general, I believe that if you don't really love what you're doing, you should stop right away - and if you *do* truly want to play, then you should play your own way and play what makes you feel good. Try to recognize the parts of your character that are your own, because a lot of people do things they think other people will like instead of embracing what they love. Do that on your instrument-play something you like, not something you'd do for someone else. That's what makes great music. My best advice for someone who wants to play music, though, is this: Pretend music is a big Mona Lisa, and paint a mustache on it !