

GUITAR WORLD, JUILLET 99

GOOD TIME BOYS par J.D. Considine

Over the years, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have been accused of a lot of things (and even convicted of a few). But one charge that has never been leveled at the band, in any of its incarnations, is that the Chili Peppers are shy or retiring.

Whether onstage or in the studio, the quartet has always been in-your-face aggressive. From their early days as sock-wearing funk punks in L.A. to the well-tooled chaos that accompanied their 1991-92 BloodSugarSexMagik tour - a marathon which included a headlining stint on the '92 Lollapalooza Festival - the Chili Peppers have come on like a full-time frat party, all sweat, noise and hormonal exertion. For a time, it looked as if the party would never end. With "Under the Bridge" giving the band a bona fide pop hit, the Chili Peppers seemed unstoppable, chugging along even after guitarist John Frusciante bailed a few months before Lollapalooza. Nor did things slow down with One Hot Minute, cut in '95 with former Jane's Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro. Hell, these guys were so animated they even did a video with Beavis and Butt-head, remaking the Ohio Players' oldie, "Love Rollercoaster". But then... nothing.

For the last three years, all has been quiet on the RHCP front. Although there were individual sightings here and there - bassist Flea joined Navarro for a Jane's Addiction reunion tour; drummer Chad Smith jammed with Stephen Perkins' band, Banyan - the band as a whole has been so quiet that industry gossips began whispering that the Chili Peppers had split.

"Right," scoffs singer Anthony Kiedis. "I once heard a rumor that I was a flamboyantly gay man who was dying of AIDS." Needless to say, and far from breaking up, the Chili Peppers just completed their hottest album in a decade, the gloriously funky Californication.

"There was a time when things were, you know, kind of in a weird space, and we weren't getting a lot of work done," admits Flea. But rumors of the band's demise were greatly exaggerated. "It's not like we ever said 'we quit' or anything," he insists. "We just weren't doing anything." Nothing at all ?

"Louis ?" says Kiedis, turning to manager Louis "Make It So" Mathieu. "What the hell did we do ?"

"Played golf," comes the answer.

"Louis went golfing," says Kiedis, laughing. "There wasn't too much activity to describe. Flea and Dave went out and did a Jane's Addiction tour, the reunion tour, and when they came back, it just seemed like the time was right to have a change. And John was back in the picture."

Just how Frusciante wound up reclaiming his spot from Navarro is, like the details of what Kiedis was up to, left vague. All Flea will say is merely that, "Things got weird, and we parted ways with Dave. Which was a sad thing. He didn't quit, and we didn't fire him; it just kind of went that way."

"And because of that, we ended up getting back with John. We got in my garage and started playing, and it felt really natural. Really good, un-forced and uncontrived, and fun."

"Fun," apparently, had been in short supply before the break. "For me, the band had started to become like a job," admits Flea. "It became less about 'Let's get together and play because this is a blast, and really fun and creatively exciting,' and more about 'Well, let's do what we have to do to keep this juggernaut going.' " Flea stops short of suggesting that this sense of careerist obligation was what led to the band taking its break, but he does think the down time was ultimately a good thing for the Chili Peppers. "I think that we needed to get to that spot in order to get to the spot where we are now," he says. "Which is a place of vibrant creativity." Flea's assessment is borne out by the new album. From the randy overdrive of "Get On Top" to the thrashing, muscular funk of "Around the World" to the amiable amble of "Road Trippin'", the album plays to all of the Chili Peppers' strengths. Californication delivers everything we expect of the band, yet somehow makes it all sound fresh in the bargain. Any doubts we might have had about the band's vitality are quashed with a single listen. But from the band's perspective, the best thing about Californication isn't that it sounds like a hit - it's that the four of them had so much fun making the album and playing together.

"We wrote a good record, and everything is really, really good for us," says Flea. "It's a happy time. I would say this is one of the best chapters in the band's history."

Such joyful enthusiasm comes in stark contrast to how things were in '92, when Frusciante checked out. "We had gotten to a point where any sort of communication between us that was positive would have been forced, because so much bad vibes had accumulated over the course of the tour for BloodSugarSexMagik," he says. That's not to say Frusciante had bad feelings toward the band as a whole. "I was talking to Flea the whole time I wasn't in the band," he says. "Our friendship was fine. Anthony - we didn't really talk much for the last year that I was in the band. And once I quit, we didn't talk to each other at all, until one occasion, about three years after I quit."

Then, almost a year ago, Kiedis approached Frusciante again, and suddenly it seemed as if all the problems of the past were behind them. "I saw that there was a possibility for friendship there that I hadn't realized was there before. We got along real well. All that's necessary for me to enjoy being in a band is for all the people to be enjoying each others' company and be able to be friends with each other."

"Another reason I was real excited about playing with them is that, as a musician, I look around in the world and see all these people playing music for reasons that don't make any sense, or that I just can't relate to. I don't see what it is that they feel is the purpose of music, you know?"

"In this band, we have this thing where each one of us has our reasons for playing music, and they somehow all fit together. I mean, the reason I started playing music was because of punk rock and new wave. And the reason that Flea started playing music was because of Louis Armstrong and jazz people. But because of what he's grown into and what I've grown into, we're playing music for very similar reasons. When we each hold our instrument, we're trying to do a very similar thing, but in a different way. So when we're all getting along, we're capable of making really good music."

"Well, why do I want to play music?" asks Anthony.

"You wanted to play music to have a good time with your friends?" says Frusciante.

"Yeah," says Kiedis, laughing. "I wanted to play music because I was inspired by the funk, and I wanted to do something with my friends, who I saw being very creative, and make music that made me feel great."

The free-flowing, funky creativity that first moved Kiedis to sing was very much in evidence as the band convened in Flea's garage. There is no Lennon or McCartney in the Red Hot Chili Peppers, because this is not a sit-down-and-write-a-song kind of band. Instead, the Chili Peppers are a jam band in the George Clinton sense of the term - one that uses improvisation as the basis for composition. "There is no one way that the songs start," says Smith. "We just get over to Flea's, sit down and start playing. Just jam. Lots of songs come out of that, and that's something, I think, that was lacking when we were working with Dave. He's more of a reactive guitar player - he puts parts to stuff that already exists."

"With us, it's just the chemistry between the four of us, and there's never any one way that it happens. Like, Flea might have been sitting at home, and he'll come up with a bass part. So he'll say, 'What do you guys think of this?' And we'll fall in and start playing. Or John, the same thing."

"There are no preconceived plans, no 'We're gonna write a funky song today'. Or a slow song. Or a fast song. It's just however we're feeling that day, that's what comes up. It's the most natural way to do it, and a big part of why the album sounds the way it does is because it's not forced."

"I think that we're conscious of what we need to do to make each song work," says Flea. "Some of the songs we play behind the beat, some we play ahead of the beat, some we play dead in the center of the beat. It's really about feeling the dynamics of the song and what serves the song the best."

"I think that with a lot of the 'youth culture' bands who are playing funk-oriented music, what they're really about is doing this perfectly in-sync, matching-up-to-computer type of music. But that lends itself to one spot, which is right square on the beat. You know what I mean? It takes the emotion out of the music."

"I'm not saying that there's not some amazing music that is done that way. But in general, there are very few bands - very few that I can think of - that have an original sound or original style. I think everyone is just like copping the same shit. Okay, Beck did a great job of having the Dust Brothers do beats, and putting human, organic sounds on top of it. But how many bands are gonna copy him and do the same thing? Fifty billion?" Who does Flea consider original? He mentions Tricky, Fugazi, Radiohead, P.J. Harvey, Unkle and the last Wu Tang Clan album as current faves, while Mingus and Black Flag top his oldies list. (Smith tends more toward Marvin Gaye, James Brown - particularly the period with bassist Bootsy Collins and drummer Clyde Stubblefield - and John Lennon.)

But for overall inspiration, Flea says, nothing tops the music of the late Nigerian superstar Fela Anikulapo Kuti. "I listen to Fela like crazy," he says. "All day long."

Fela's hectoring, politicized lyrics and driving, hypnotic groove made the singer and saxophonist a legendary figure in the Seventies and Eighties, when his music was considered such a threat to the Nigerian government that, in 1977, troops attacked and destroyed his Kalakuta compound, outside Lagos. Over the years, Fela's music has been imitated or praised by everyone from Talking Heads (who drew heavily from his Afrobeat sound for *Remain in Light*) to Paul McCartney.

"I have a greatest-hits record that I really like, which has 'Gentleman,' 'Lady' and 'Kalakuta Show' on it," says Flea. "And I'm listening to *Zombie* [1976], *He Miss Road* [1975], *Coffin for Head of State* [1981] and *Expensive Shit* [1975], which is an incredible fucking record."

Frusciante is also a rabid Fela fan. "I play along with these records," he says. "I do it every day. If I'm going to be playing guitar all day, I start with that, because just playing one groove over and over - the songs are usually between 10 and 15 minutes long each - that's the best kind of practice you can do. "When I was a teenager, I used to figure out the saxophone solos and stuff," he adds. "But that's not as valuable to me any

more as just playing the four - or five - note patterns that he picks for one of the guitar players, and just playing those notes over and over and over. By the end of practice, I'm more in the groove, and it's good to get into a groove where you feel like you could be playing with them, you know ?"

Frusciante also likes to listen closely to the other instruments while remaining locked into that four - or five - note vamp. "While the horn solo's playing, I'll often picture what the notes are in my head," he says. "Even though I'm playing the rhythm guitar part, I'm following the solo and imagining where those notes would be on guitar."

Listening to others while holding up your end of the groove is an essential part of playing funk music, and the fact that Frusciante falls into that habit even when practicing helps explain why the Chili Peppers write and play the way they do.

"It's a really communal thing," says Flea. "A lot of bands have leaders, one guy who's the main creative force. With us, it's a real four-way effort. Basically, we get together and start making noise, and when it feels good, we call it a song. You know ?"

Because the interplay between the four is so intuitive and emotional, it's often impossible to reduce a Chili Pepper jam to a simple process of cause and effect. "It's not like listening to another guy and hearing what he's playing, and saying, 'Oh, that's bitchin'. That's gonna make me do this,' " says Flea. "When it's at its best, there's no thought involved. It's just like energy in the air."

Inevitably, the band will go back to the best bits of a particular jam and try to develop them into a song. "We all kind of know when it feels good. So if it feels good, then we'll record it," says Smith. "We'll make little tapes, then Anthony will go and listen to them in the car. He'll come up with an idea, and he'll come back to us. It kinda goes around like that."

"The reason this record came out so good for me is because the music sort of told me what to sing," says Kiedis. "I didn't have to think too much about it. The music definitely implied what the vocals should be. All I had to do was close my eyes and I could hear what my parts were."

"Which is a huge difference from how it had been for a while, where either my head had been closed off or I wasn't as inspired by what I was hearing. But when John came back, things just flowed." Ironically, even though things were rockin' when the four played together in Flea's garage, life outside rehearsals was just plain rocky. Kiedis and Frusciante were in the process of getting sober after dealing with long - term drug problems, while Flea and Smith were going through romantic difficulties, with Flea suffering through a painful breakup and Smith dealing with divorce.

The Chili Peppers don't subscribe to the "you gotta suffer" school of music-making - "We don't have to be tortured to make good music," Smith says flatly - but neither do they deny that there was some exceptional emotional energy at play in the making of this album. "I listened to it the other day, and I thought, Wow, it really is a pretty relaxed record," says Flea. "And considering what we've been through, I would have thought it would be more edgy or something. I know for myself, a lot of times when we were recording the record I was feeling so much emotional pain - hot and cold flashes and stuff. But it really is relaxed."

For a moment, Flea is at a loss to explain how the album could feel so comfortable when he and his bandmates were in torment. Eventually, he suggests that what we're ultimately hearing in the album is honesty - the sound of four guys who aren't afraid to be open to one another. "Being true to yourself is about being relaxed," he says. "So I guess, even though you don't even realize it at the time, when you're like in romantic pain or some kind of pain like that, by feeling that pain and not running away from it, you're being honest... I guess you're relaxed when you're really being yourself. Even though you might not feel it at the time."

For his part, Kiedis was feeling awash in affection while the band was making music. That's reflected to a certain degree in the album's lyrics, which are far more romantic than the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am attitude found in early Chili Peppers songs like "Party on Your Pussy." It's one thing for Kiedis to come off all warm and fuzzy on ballad fare like "Porcelain" and "This Velvet Glove," but there's even a sensitive, romantic side to uptempo funk-rockers like "Around the World."

"There were a lot of romantic feelings," says Kiedis. "That was definitely swimming through my heart, because there's what seems to be sexual descriptives, in different, metaphorical ways, in the songs, but really, it's more about the romance of it than the physical feelings of sex. It's more the emotional feelings of life and love, intertwined with sexual rhythms and melodies."

Life and love intertwined with sexual rhythms and melodies - that's the Chili Peppers in a nutshell. Still, it'd be a mistake to read too much into the band's lyrics. Kiedis admits that he's more interested in conveying content through sound than he is concerned with the specifics of word choice. "It's kind of like the ancient language of Sanskrit, which was designed to have a sonic effect on your nerves and your emotions," he says. "Even if you don't know what the word means in the dictionary, it still affects you with the feeling, just the sound of that word. So even if you don't read the lyrics and follow them in a linear fashion, they do have an effect on you, just the sound of them."

"That's something that John is very sensitive to."

"Well, at this point, I definitely have favorite lyrics," says Frusciante. "But I didn't really focus on the lyrics, so much as the sound of the lyrics, until we were actually recording it." Frusciante's favorite is the song "Other Side," which addresses the struggle between one's conscious self and the "other" side. It's not a moral song in the usual sense - "Separate my side, I don't/I don't believe it's bad," goes one part of the chorus - but neither does it suggest that the listener merely give in.

"It's the kind of lyrics that I really love," says the guitarist. "Just the sound of them, and also, I suppose, the vibe of the lyrics. They were inspired by [20th century mystic] Aleister Crowley, and his books have a vibe that appeals to me a great deal. It's just very emotional to me. When I listen to that song, the main thing I focus on is the lyrics, and I get chills every time certain parts come up.

"I used to get a chill during the intro, but now I get a chill at the bridge."

"The funny thing for me is," says Kiedis, "some of the biggest chills I get when I listen to this record are actually from musical breakdowns, in the sections where there are no lyrics at all. Which may be because I stop listening to myself and just listen to the overall vibe of what's happening. But it often happens to me that I get the biggest chill during bridges and guitar solos and musical outros, and things like that."

Kiedis adds that, as originally written, the songs on Californication had more in the way of instrumental interludes than they do on the finished version of the album. The bridge to "Other Side" is a case in point. "Anthony didn't want to write lyrics for that section," says Frusciante, "but Rick made him." "Rick," of course, is producer Rick Rubin, who also oversaw the making of BloodSugarSexMagik and One Hot Minute. "Rick and I got into a pretty funny argument in the studio," says Kiedis. "Because Rick thinks that a section doesn't have that much meaning until it has lyrics on it."

Kiedis, by contrast, is a big fan of the band bits. "I like very much the guitar solo in the middle of 'Cafifornication,'" he says, "because it seems like just the perfect amount of notes to tell a story during that song. When I listen to that guitar solo, it speaks to me in kind of a non-verbal language."

"I also like the intro to 'Around the World,' because it's just pure, unconfined, Flea-style energy and when John comes in, it's a push-everything-to-the-limit sonic overload. It just comes flying out of the top of your head." "In that particular case, John came in one day with that funky guitar part," says Flea, "and that was just what I started playing on it."

That's not false modesty on Flea's part, either. "As I learn more about music, I become less and less interested in doing anything fancy," he explains. "Sometimes the simplest, boring little thing will make the song sound the best. I've become more about just serving the song, and less about 'Hey, I can play some really amazing, trippy bass lines that will blow your mind.'

"Of course, his simple, song-serving bass lines can be pretty mind-blowing as well. "Flea's bass playing on this record sounds to me like it's James Jamerson of the New Millennium," blurts Smith, and Flea starts laughing. "I'm serious !" insists the drummer.

As much as Californication benefits from the raw energy and uncluttered thump of the band's guitar-bass-and-drums lineup, there are a number of points at which the arrangements are sweetened by synths and other keyboards. Much of it is fairly subtle, but there are a few moments when the keyboards come to the fore, as when "Road Trippin' " trots out its retro-psychedelic Chamberlin solo.

"That was Rick's doing," says Frusciante of the Chamberlin part. "None of us were there for that. But it was good. I liked it." Greg Kurstin of Geggy Tah plays keyboards on several tracks, and Frusciante himself added some synth to the title track. "I put a little thing on that with this synthesizer I have at my house," he says. "I tried to get the sound I hear on some Cure records."

"Who played that thing on the chorus of 'Around the World' ?" asks Kiedis.

"Me and Flea," Frusciante answers. "We played an Omnichord on the chorus of 'Around the World.' It took a team of us to play that part : me and Flea and Jim Scott, the engineer. It's a simple piece of machinery - you just press one button and you hear a chord - but it took three of us to do it."

Kiedis cracks up. "All they had to do was call me up, and I could have hashed that out for 'em, but..." Frusciante laughs and explains that the reason it took three people was the Omnichord doesn't allow for chromatics. (Not very "omni," is it ?) "So we had to slow down the tape for one chord, and then speed it back up for the other three chords. That's why it took three of us. Flea was the brains behind the operation - he figured it out. Jim Scott was doing the technical part of it, and I was pushing the buttons for three of the chords."

Flea may have masterminded the Omnichord interlude, but nobody really dominated the band's decision-making process, as each member had veto-power over the album's mixes and running order "For this record, we cut, I think, 28 songs," says Flea. "And not all of them got completely finished. How many did we finish, Chad, in the studio... 23 ? 24 ?"

"Something like that," answers Smith.

"Yeah, like 24 songs were actually finished in the studio, and we're going to put 14 of them on the record. It was hard for us to agree which ones we think are the best. We all think differently about it. So we just kind of made a list of the ones that we all agreed on, and those are the ones we put on the record.

"But I can't say for sure that those are better than the ones we left off."