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RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON: JOHN FRUSCIANTE FIRES UP THE CHILI PEPPERS par Matt Blackett

John Frusciante is back in the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The news has been greeted with cautious optimism by fans of his funky, gut-level guitar work on the Peppers' *Mother's Milk* and *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, and those who know Frusciante's story understand why. For those who don't, a condensed version of the saga goes something like this : After cowriting the Peppers' biggest hits, Frusciante unexpectedly left the band in 1992 to release two bizarre solo albums and battle his personal demons. For awhile, even Frusciante's most ardent supporters questioned his capacity to rekindle the flame that made the Chili Peppers so red hot during his brief tenure.

Any doubts are instantly laid to rest, however, as the band launches into a May 5th rehearsal for the a tour to support the new album, *Californication* [Warner Bros.]. In a warm-up jam, Frusciante's playing is free and powerful - a psychedelic blend of clean funk rhythms, spacey textures, and blistering distortion. The telepathic communication between the Peppers - particularly between Frusciante and bassist Flea - is almost unnerving. It's very clear that this is not just four guys playing. This is a *band*. The jam takes place at Hollywood's Swing House rehearsal studio - a relaxed, dreamy hideaway with blinking white Christmas lights and colored spotlights adorning the ceiling. A multi-breasted, Venus de Milo-style mannequin watches over the band from behind four half-stacks. Several guitars are stacked haphazardly into a rack.

Clad in thrift-store polyester and sporting a Manson-esque beard and haircut, Frusciante makes a disconcerting first impression. Clearly more at ease playing than talking, he is nonetheless gracious about discussing songwriting, equipment, technique, and the making of *Californication*. Easing into full Chinese splits, he sits on the floor and starts in. Frusciante still seems to be off in his own world, but he manages to keep one foot in ours.

How long did you spend writing and recording *Californication* ?

We started in June 1998, but we took some time off for one reason or another. We probably spent a total of four months rehearsing and writing, and then we went into the studio and recorded everything in three weeks.

Let's talk about some specific tracks. What's the signal chain for "Around the World" ?

That's a Fender Jaguar I borrowed from our recording engineer, Jim Scott. I like Jags - they get a real cool, cheap sound. I played it through two Marshalls : a JTM 45 and a 100-watt SuperBass. That SuperBass is great. It's so thick sounding.

The tone changes a few times during the tune.

I used the Jag for the whole song, but I changed the 2-position toggle by the roller knobs. It's down for the intro and verse, and up for the chorus.

But the intro and verse tones sound very different.

The single-note line sounds different because I'm hitting the guitar differently. How you use the muscles in your wrist really makes a big difference. I don't know exactly how many muscles there are, but there are a lot, and they're all different. I didn't switch pickups until the chorus, though.

The sixteenth-note groove that you and Flea play in "Parallel Universe" is pretty tight. Did you record it with a click ?

No. You'd have to ask Chad [Smith, the Chili Peppers' drummer], but I don't think we recorded a click track.

What's the out-of-control phaser sound at the end of that song ?

I borrowed an MXR Phase 100 from the people who were recording next door. I was looking a way to approach that solo, and the Phase 100 worked well.

How was the first single, "Scar Tissue", recorded ?

That was my '55 Strat with the maple neck - most of the basic tracks were recorded with that guitar. I think I ran it through the Showman because the Marshall wasn't clean enough.

How did that part come about ?

I used that technique - taking two notes that are far apart and playing them in a cool rhythm - on my first solo record. "Scar Tissue" is a very simple example of the technique, but I think it's a style that sounds like me.

Were the slide parts cut with the Strat as well ?

No. I used a '65 Telecaster. There are two different solos - I just turned on a fuzz pedal for the second one.

What's the wah in the intro of "Get on Top" ?

It's the Ibanez WH-10. They don't make them anymore, but it's the only wah I use. Other wah pedals are very wrong for me.

What's the difference ?

There's this *huge* difference. Other wahs seem to cut the volume in half and the tone isn't as thick - it's suddenly smaller. With the Ibanez, the tone stays big, and it has a really wide range. It also has a switch for either bass or guitar. For "Get on Top", I used the bass setting. The solo on "I Like Dirt" was played with the guitar setting.

Did you use the Strat for "Get on Top" ?

Yeah, the '55. It's the best feeling neck ever. I'm going to gig with this one and the '62 with the rosewood neck.

The tune feels similar to some tracks on Blood Sugar Sex Magik. Is it a conscious nod to songs of that era ?

No, it's not. I was listening to Public Enemy one morning, and I came up with that rhythm on the way to rehearsal - just tapping it out with my foot. In fact, that's me working Flea's wah pedal with that rhythm at the end of the song.

It's another fairly understated solo.

In rehearsal, I was playing more screaming guitar solos for this song, but I ended up playing that solo with a '56 Gibson ES-175 that had .013s on it. I didn't use the 175 for too many things - only "Porcelain" and this solo.

So what were you thinking ?

I was thinking about Steve Howe's solo at the end of Yes' "Siberian Khatru". The band sound is really big - and they're playing fast - and then this clean guitar comes out over the top. It's really beautiful, like it's on its own sort of shelf. For "Get on Top", I wanted to play something that would create a contrast between the solo and the background.

The tones on "Otherside" don't sound like anything you've done before.

That was a '55 Gretsch White Falcon through the Showman and a Marshall 4x12 cabinet. For the breakdown section, I used a '61 Gibson SG Custom into a cranked Marshall JCM 800. I think that's the best kind of distortion - a humbucker into a Marshall, like Eddie Van Halen.

"Emit Remmus" - what's the significance of the title and how did you get that sustain ?

The title is "summer time" backwards. I got the sustain the old-fashioned way - two full stacks turned up really loud. It's all one track, played on a Strat that was tuned down a whole-step, just for fun.

How did you get the feedback note to change ?

That can come from how you move your body, but I didn't move that much. I think it has more to do with how you breathe and what you're thinking about.

Your solo on "I Like Dirt" is the closest thing to a Mother's Milk solo that you've done in a long time - it almost sounds out of character at this point.

It doesn't *feel* out of character. I'm playing busier solos these days - that started happening about halfway through recording the album. But while we were writing, I had this concept of what the guitar's role should be, and it had nothing to do with what goes through your head when you play a "rock star" guitar solo. I wasn't thinking about solos - I just wanted to think about the songs. By the time we recorded, though, *that's* the solo that came out. My idea of what constitutes good guitar playing is always changing.

You use some pretty extreme effects on "Savior".

Yeah. That heavy delay tone is my '55 Strat into an Electro-Harmonix Micro Synth and a 16 Second Delay Even though it's a weird sound, it's inspired directly by Eric Clapton's playing in Cream. If you listen to the actual notes, they're like a Clapton solo - they just don't sound like it because of the effects. I don't think anybody's guitar playing is better than what he did in Cream. I don't think there's any reason for a guitar soloist to try to go anywhere beyond that. It's the ultimate. It's possible to create other musical colors, of course, but as far as solos go, I think that's it.

Describe the songwriting process for the Chili Peppers.

Some songs come from jams, and some come from parts that someone writes on their own. In my case, I write a million things that I throw away before I stumble upon something that ends up on the record. Certain things are only good at the moment you write them. Others are good for a while, and then lose something. Some ideas keep getting more magical vibrations attached to them - they sound better and better the more everybody hears them. *Those* are the things that become songs.

What's an example of a song you came up with on your own ?

"Around the World". I thought of that guitar part at my house, and I said to everyone, "You gotta hear this, but I can't play it by myself, or you'll hear *one* in the wrong place because it has a really deceptive downbeat". I had Chad keep time on the hi-hat while I played the lick. Everybody dug it, so I just kept playing it over and over until Flea came up with his bass part.

How long did you jam on the "Around the World" lick until Flea composed his bass line ?

Maybe 15 minutes. Flea is the best bass player in the world. His sense of timing and the way he thinks is so crazy. I mean, the way that bass line goes with my guitar part is amazing. When we play them without the drums, they don't make any sense. But with the drums, they really rock in. Our styles complement each other, and we really love playing together.

What are some tunes that grew out of jams ?

"Parallel Universe", "Scar Tissue", "I Like Dirt", and "This Velvet Glove". We improvise every day. We have the same sort of freedom and interaction that people had in the '60s when they were playing extended solos, but we don't feature any one soloist. It's much more about parts and rhythms that balance each other out and create something special.

As your producer, what does Rick Rubin bring to the process ?

He's not exactly involved in the writing, but he plays a big part in the construction of the songs. He'll tell us if a song needs a section or a part, and he helps us balance the songs so we don't have sections that are too long or too short. He's the perfect producer for us.

The new record has *extreme* dynamics. Is that Rubin's influence ?

That's just the natural outcome of trying to approach every song differently. I try to approach every section differently. Flea and I hit our instruments in different ways for each section, and that creates varied dynamics.

You once said, "It isn't technique that's important, but the expression of your life through your music". But you've got technique - where does it fit into the picture ?

I stopped thinking about the guitar as this thing that I was performing these little exercises on, and started viewing it as something that made sounds that broke into the air and created something out of nothing. That's what music is to me. Now that I know that, I can work really hard at technique, and it doesn't make a difference when I come into the studio or the rehearsal hall. What's important is to reflect who you are. The trouble with technical guitar playing is that it doesn't leave any room for who the person is. They've filled up all the spaces with tricks and fast scales, and space is probably the most important element in music. I must admit that I'm playing a lot more flashy solos these days, though.

So the guitar solo isn't dead ?

No, it's definitely not. But many people's *approach* to soloing is dead. As for as guitar-hero playing goes, I think the farthest it got was what Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and Jimi Hendrix did in the '60s. I don't think it gets any better than that, you know ? I liked what Eddie Van Halen did on his first few albums, but I don't like what anyone has done who was inspired by his playing. I think what new wave and punk guitarists were doing in the early '80s was the most exciting stuff since those '60s guys. Every punk guitarist had his own sound, and they were getting colors out of the guitar that were theirs alone. That's a much more open road that few people concentrate on.

How important is gear for you ? Do you play differently on a Les Paul as opposed to a Jaguar ?

Absolutely. I have a different style on each guitar, and I like guitars that make you look at music differently. I dug the idea of playing the Gretsch White Falcon on some tunes because I can't sound like a confident, rock star guitarist on a guitar with .012s on it. I need to apply a different musical sense to make it work. It's funny - Jeff Beck can make any guitar sound like him with just his fingers. I'm the opposite. I play according to how the guitar is. I'm the same way with effects. For example, on *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, I went direct into the board and overdrove the channel input for the solo to "Suck My Kiss". Now, I can't get a cheap sound like that and play my usual guitar things because they won't sound good. I react to the sound.

Is there any one tune that sums up John Frusciante ?

Probably. "Usually Just a T-shirt #2" off my first solo record. I couldn't pick a Chili Peppers song because that music is for the whole band. With us, it isn't about getting John Frusciante across, it's about the part I play getting everybody across.