

**THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS**

**My first concert was Adrian Belew, who was my favourite guitarist when I was 14, and I saw Yngwie Malmsteen opening for AC/DC a couple of years later at the Forum (in L.A)  
The Chili Peppers have had a very Spinal Tap approach to guitarists. From Hillel Slovak to John Frusciante to Dave Navarro, and now back to John Frusciante, the band has never had the luxury of a settled guitarist in their line up. With the return of Frusciante, the band seems to re-energised. Chris Hoare talks to the man himself.**

**You've just starting playing some shows. How have they been going ?**

The tour's going great. I've been playing something different every night. I especially love everybody listening to each other on stage and getting off on each other's performance. A band with good chemistry should appreciate each other. It's great because we all very much appreciate the fact that we've got a chemistry that we will never equal with any other group of musicians. We sound our best when playing with each other you know. We're the perfect four muscians to be playing together, I mean, we were then (before Frusciante's departure in 1992), but we didn't really appreciate it enough.

**Dave Navarro was a great guitar player, but he didn't seem quite right for the Peppers**

Yeah, exactly. His chemistry was in Jane's Addiction, because that's where he learned to play. He was in Jane's Addiction when he was seventeen years-old and his style was very much to do with how Steven played drums and Eric played bass, and the way Perry sang. He made his guitar style fit into that. I joined the Chili Peppers when I was eighteen, and I made my guitar style fit, to be the best player I could be with Flea. And so that we could write songs that Anthony would be able to sing over.

**Not only is your style of playing perfect for the Chili Peppers, your guitar tone seems to fit in so well with Flea's bass sound. Do you work a lot at getting a particular sound ?**

No, not really. That's just the kind of sound that I like to get. I don't really go much for the big, eighties heavy metal sound. I'm trying to get a more cheap approach to the kind of sound I get. Not only is it the perfect sound to go with Flea's bass playing, but the drums also have a certain sound when the guitar takes up less room with the frequencies. A lot of people try to get big guitar sounds, and as a result the drums sound smaller. The cleaner your guitar sound is, and the more space you have on your guitar parts, the more often you are going to hear the ambience of the drums, which to me is one of the more exciting parts of a band.

**It always seems that you can hear everything going on in each song.**

Yeah, well that has a lot to do with the way we write songs. Each person comes up with their own part. It occurred to me just today actually that when we write songs it's like building a house.. Chad for instance might decide on the perimeters, you know, how big the house is going to be, and what area of space the floor is going to cover. And then another person puts the walls on it, and then another person puts the roof and the ceiling on it, and then another person makes it look a certain way inside. And that's how our songs are put together, with each person doing their bit to create the final thing. We jam a lot and improvise, which is something that sets us apart from a lot of other bands, I think, particularly if their styles don't lend themselves to jamming. We improvise, and we're really good at it. Every time we rehearse we record at least five different jams that could make great songs. It's usually just us that jam and jam and jam and then Anthony starts dancing round to one of the jams and tells us that that's got to be a song, and then we think what the next section should be like. Writing songs comes very naturally. It's not hard at all. Like I said, we just jam and the songs come out of it. We actually come up with way more material than we would need to come up with (for an album). So then we generally leave it up to Anthony to tell us which pieces of music he feels should be taken further into finished song form.

**Do you find it hard to decide which songs get completed and which don't ?**

Not really. There are some really good ones that didn't end up on the album, but you people in Australia are going to get three more songs on the album than people in other countries. It has something to do with your imports - I think you guys get fucked over with imports. So those were three extra songs that were finished, but we had some other ones which were really great - two in particular that Anthony has to finish the words to. The only reason he didn't finish them was because he and Rick, (Rubin the producer), showed me and Flea a list of six songs and asked which of these songs were the most important to us. So we picked three of them, and he finished writing those. But the other three... they're still in limbo, you know. But he'll finish them at one point or another. The songs that we write are really weird. They're not like anybody else. Most people write songs, and they have chord progressions, and maybe a riff, and so on. But ours... These multiple colours that each person sets up on their instrument, and they're totally independent of each other. The guitar part and the bass part only relate to each other in the sense of feeling, but they don't do the same thing. They weave in and out of each other. I always feel like Flea's sense of rhythm comes out of the fact that he started out on trumpet, and that Jazz was the music that made him want to be a musician. But while he's never consciously tried to apply that knowledge to the bass, on bass he's only tried to play funk and punk rock and so on, it is still in his spiritual make-up. the types of rhythms and melodies and plays on bass - the only person who has sounded as rooted in jazz as Flea, that appealed to a rock audience has been Jack Bruce, who is my favourite bass player.

### **What's your approach to improving your ability as a guitarist ?**

I practice all the time and I know about theory, in fact I think of music that way, because I think of music every way that I can. Like, if I'm making up a backing vocal part of a song, I know what interval I'm singing in and I know how it relates to the chords in the song. I believe that when you make music, you're playing with matter that the infinite is made up of. Understanding chord theory and understanding intervals and notes and the way music is written on a page can make your use of these elements of infinity, bigger. On the other hand technical knowledge can also make your understanding of music's relationship to infinity, smaller. For me it makes it bigger, but there was a time in my life that it made it smaller, and when I saw it having that effect, I just forgot about it all. I forgot that I ever knew how to read music, and I forgot that I ever knew what the name of a note was. And that was when I felt I started coming up with my own style of writing songs and of playing guitar. So when I had my own style, I started thinking about that stuff again, and I found it made my style more magical. And it only makes my perspective of my understanding of how infinite music is so much deeper. When I hear music, it's just amazing to me how many different combinations of colours and sounds there are. It's unlimited really.

### **Does your choice of gear affect the way you play ?**

Absolutely. I play in response to the kind of instrument that I'm using. I play differently on different guitars. On the album, (Californication), I mostly play a Fender Stratocaster from 1956, or '55 or something. It has a maple neck and it's really a great guitar. Actually, when I bought it, a guitar expert that was with me insisted that the pickups were original, and the people in the store thought they were original, but after I had finished recording the album I took it to the guy who re-frets my guitars and he said that it had Seymour Duncan's in it that had been made to look like they were the original pick-ups. But the guitar sounded great, and that's what I used for most of the basics. There are a couple of songs where I used a White Falcon from 1955 which had .12 gauge strings on it. Usually I use only .10s, but this guitar has .12s on it. There's this guy, Ricky Wilson, who was the guitarist for the B-52s. He was one of my favourite guitarists, although he's dead now, but he uses really thick strings and he only uses four strings, (the D and G strings were removed). So he would make up these guitar parts that would go in two directions at once, which was a really cool style and was very inspirational to me. So anyway, I bought this kind of guitar because it is the coolest looking guitar I've ever seen, and I'm gradually coming up with a style on it that fits in with the way Flea plays. I used it on the song 'Californication' and also 'The Other Side'. But definitely the best way for me to play my best with Flea is with a guitar with .10s on it, but it's fun to try to come up with a style that has as much movement and draws colours in just as colourful way with a guitar with .12s on it. It's very different, 'cause you can't do vibrato as much as on a guitar with .10s, but it's fun. When you get .12s or higher, it starts to sound like surf music, you know, Dick Dale and so on. The notes don't ring out at all. .11s are cool - fact that's what I have on this guitar I'm holding right now which is a Fender Mustang that I bought for practising in my room. I don't use all that many effects. I use a Fuzz Tone, and a distortion pedal, a wah wah pedal, and a chorus pedal. On stage I can get a lot of different sounds just with those four things. Mostly I play with a clean tone; it's rare that I turn on the distortion pedal - that's only if I'm going to do a solo, and solo-ing is not that important a part of my style. The more important part is playing texturally and playing different colours.

### **How do you practice ?**

What I do is play along with records. My ear is such that I know how to play the guitar part of an album, but putting very little energy into figuring it out. I've heard it enough times I just know how to play it. I mostly just play along with things because it deepens my sense of all the different colours I can draw upon when making music - and every day I am inspired by a new group of musicians. Like right now I'm thinking about Pete Townsend, but a week before that it was Eddie Van Halen and so on.

### **Are there any people you constantly get inspired by ?**

Yeah, Jimmy Page and Eric Clapton in Cream and Jimi Hendrix. I think they are the best guitarists, those people. But I really listen to a wide variety of music, like, I'm a big David Bowie fan, I love Black Sabbath and Captain Beefheart... there are so many people really. I love the Butthole Surfers, I love the Cure, Bob Marley, Joy Division... there's very little good music that I'm not into. Right now, I'm really into John Coltrane and the music he was making in the 60's when he got on a really spiritual trip.

### **How was the recording of the album ?**

Well, I hadn't spent too much time playing guitar over the past few years, so my hands were kind of weak. They didn't really get extremely strong until we had almost finished recording. I had a really strong right wrist right from the start, but that was kind of cool because that was like a lot of punk rock guitarists - they have incredibly strong right wrists you know, for doing really fast downstrokes. So that had an affect on my style of guitar playing during the recording. Which was great because I really wanted to approach my guitar playing from a non musicians standpoint, because that's the kind of guitar playing that never eats itself up, as you sometimes do if you focus too much on the technical aspect. But I worked really hard during the recording of this album. I was playing guitar constantly and when we were writing it, and when we were recording, I would go home and play for five hours after a ten hour recording session.

### **Do you have a favourite song on Californication ?**

Ahh...Yeah...'Right On Time'. I like that a lot because it combines that transitional period when I stopped liking disco and started liking punk. That song to me sounds like both kinds of music, but in a way that's modern and cool. I mean it won't remind anybody specifically of punk or disco, but it has the vibe of both.

**A lot of the songs seem tailor made for playing around with when you tour.**

It's funny you should say that because the way that I'm playing now, (on tour), is so different to the way I played on the album. Now my playing is flashy and solo oriented. I'm really showing off a lot! But when we did the album, I wasn't like that at all. When I say my playing is flashy, it's more flashy in the way of Jimmy Page and Pete Townsend than say like Jeff Beck. I mean, Jeff Beck has always been inspirational to me since I was a kid, but as I've developed my own style I would say it has very little to do with his playing. Before recording, Rick Rubin would say, "Let's put a solo there", or "what about a solo in this part?" and I was like, "I don't want to do solos - that doesn't fit in with what I'm trying to do with this album."

But now after the recording, my fingers have got really strong, I love solo-ing now. I'm playing totally different live to what I did on the record, which makes it fun. we'll be playing through most of the (northern hemisphere) summer, and then I think we should be touring Australia in January next year.