

## Red Hot Chili Peppers- The Young Ones

"KERRANG!" (n°911 - Juillet 2002) - Ian Winwood

The Red Hot Chili Peppers playing to 700 people in a North London club is no matter how jaded the eyes, an Event. On this clammy Friday evening the Highbury Garage is packed like a vacuum-sealed pound of filter coffee; the wiser members of the audience are standing beneath ceiling air vents, the thirsty ones are queuing three-deep at the bar. Outside tickets are changing hands for sums that are not so much outrageous as blasphemous.

But then, this is the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and tonight is an occasion that means all sorts of things. For a start there's exclusivity; chances are the band will not play a show in such a setting for quite some time. This is a group who, over the years, have crept into the realm of the Truly Famous. For one hour and one hour only, this is an experience to be traded in for serious "I was there" nostalgia points.

Onstage, the Red Hot Chili Peppers might well be the same outfit who have cavorted the boards in various states of undress for almost 20 years now. But this impression only lasts for a second. Yes, the band are still topless, still buffed and holy still aglow with the vibrancy and can-do dynamics Southern California. But look again: tonight the skin looks older, the lines look thicker. And even from the back of the club, the scars on the guitarist's arms look livid and deep.

But the Red Hot Chili Peppers are still here. As the bands they once shared stages and sentences with - Jane's Addiction, Faith No More, Fishbone - have faded into memory or else glided into reverential nostalgia, this most Californian of quartets have stubbornly, unfathomably, refused to fold. And, perhaps as remarkably, have continued to keep looking to the future. This is the story of how the Red Hot Chili Peppers refused to give it away.

Seventy-nine hours previously, at 2pm on a Tuesday afternoon, it's press hell in a heavenly West London hotel. The four members of the band - vocalist Anthony Kiedis, bassist Flea, guitarist John Frusciante and drummer Chad Smith- are each sitting in one of four suites on the second floor of the Knightsbridge Mandarin Hotel, overlooking the capital's Royal Parks, downwind from Harrods. In a separate room are the journalists, waiting and fidgeting, smoking but not talking, as a representative of the band's management firm, Q-Prime, cues up "By The Way", the band's new album - their eighth - on the hotel room stereo. Given that the record is still shrouded in secrecy and security, we're asked if any of us have our tape recorders switched on. It's difficult not to laugh and applaud in squeals of delight.

But then again, it's also difficult not to be struck by at least some sense of occasion. There are few groups around today who are as storied as the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Not only have they made music that has been loved and adored over the years but they've done so very much on their own terms, at their own pace and in their own style. They have almost split on a number of occasions -usually following the departure, or the death, of one guitarist or another- but somehow they never quite made it to the crematorium. Instead they moved on, and they got better. And, as "By The Way" shows, they're better now than they have ever been.

"There have been some press-worthy moments that people like to get into with our band," says Anthony Kiedis. "You know, people dying and all of that. But it's all part of the picture. I can't say that I'm at all grateful for having lost one of my friends (Hillel Slovak, the band's original guitarist, who died of a heroin overdose) early on in the career of this band. But in some ways I am grateful for the struggles that we've gone through. It was the greatest series of lessons that I could have ever come across".

The Red Hot Chili Peppers are, for purposes of time, undertaking separate interviews today. And that time is getting thinner by the man. By the penultimate interview, a scheduled half hour with John Frusciante has been shaved to 15 minutes. When each interview is finished -actually, not so much finished, but all out of time- it's out of the door and down to the gathering room to wait with the other journalists. It's such fun.

Anthony Kiedis is the first member of the band to open his mouth for you, and in some ways the toughest to unlock. Smaller than you would imagine but smarter than you might think, Kiedis is wittily quizzical -"What constitutes metal?!" he wonders, pondering the line-up for the Ozzfest - and slightly Californian. You get the feeling that even though you've just introduced yourself he would be hard pressed to remember your name. Because he has no need to. And while he answers every question thrown up Kiedis does give the air of being nobody's fool. That is, you can imagine him having an off day, even if this isn't one of them.

These days Anthony Kiedis begins his morning by walking his dog, Buster, from his home at the top of the Hollywood Hills, two miles down, and then running back to the house in time for breakfast. It is, he says, good preparation for heading out on tour. You can ask him if he minds you asking the last time he took heroin and he'll say "not at all", even though the closest you can pin him is that "it's been a while". Then he'll astonish you with his candour stating, without prompting, that his sex life is currently "in the doldrums" since his recent split with his "soul mate", Yohanna.

The reason for the split?

"I wanted to move in the direction of a family, which for me is easy because I've found myself and I've found what I want to do, and she's sort of in the process of finding out who she is and trying to make her mark creatively. So we were at different points in our lives, unfortunately."

This is quite some distance from the man who remarked, 10 years ago that his upper body was in such good shape because of the amount of sex he was enjoying.

"I think it was more like 15 years ago that I said that," says Kiedis, with a shrug of laughter. "When people ask you silly

questions about your upper arms you're bound to answer with a flippant and silly remark. That's not to say that I wasn't some kind of idiotic, egotistical maniac back then. And I don't feel ashamed of saying things like that, but today that certainly wouldn't be my answer."

Perhaps the reason for this is that on the first day of November Anthony Kiedis will be 40 years old. Chad Smith -ostensibly the most down-to-earth of the four, interviewed for this piece but more happy to talk about how he received a signed Detroit Red Wings hockey jersey for his 40th birthday than anything as mundane as music- and Flea are also of similar age. Flea and Kiedis have been in the Red Hot Chili Peppers for fully half of their lives and have suffered as many of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune as any you might care to nominate. And with the history of a band schooled in schism, drugs, breakdowns, drugs, death and drugs behind them, such landmark birthdays seem notable not only with regard to the young man's game that is rock'n' roll but the very nature of the Red Hot Chili Peppers themselves.

"I feel like we're just getting started," says Kiedis. "I don't really think of it with regard to age, and I'm certainly not thinking about it terms of my age, but rather how the band has grown. On a daily basis I find a sense of joy and gratitude that this is how I spend my life. And that I get to spend my life with people I love, instead of having to do it by myself."

John Frusciante looks like Jesus of Nazareth. With amnesia. Dressed in dark trousers and a pale wool jumper, the guitarist is wandering around the luscious furnishings and chromium steel coffee pots of his interview suite trying to remember which hotel room he slept in last night. "I can't remember the number," he says, to no-one in particular. A quick call to reception and the answer is found. He mumbles his thanks and wanders out of the room. "Bless him," says a member of the band's entourage.

If the theme of this feature is one of redemption -or at the very least, escape- then the feeling is that John Frusciante has redeemed himself to the furthest degree. That is, he's been the luckiest. And if a story about the Red Hot Chili Peppers' present cannot be told without a nod to their past, then it's the past of John Frusciante that draws the harder stares.

With hindsight, the guitarist says, he should have left this band at the end of the recording of '91's "BloodSugarSexMagik" album. Instead he stayed for the subsequent tour, a thought process that had more to do with "my ego than it did my heart". It was, he says, a "desperately painful and confusing time in my life".

Returning home from the road, he withdrew to his living room and stayed out of the light. He took heroin and he took cocaine. The teeth fell out of his head and the bottom fell out of his world.

"Heroin and coke made me feel better," he says. "It made the pain go away. At least it did at first. But I definitely don't recommend drug use or being a drug addict to someone who is in pain. But if you are truly in as much pain as I was then you have no choice but to be a drug addict."

This "drug addict" thing went on for five years, from the age of 23 to the age of 28 (Frusciante is 32 now). He tried on two occasions to wash himself clean, but his heart really wasn't in it. He only did it, he says, "because I was literally about to die". But then he received a blood transfusion and "I was like, "Great, I'm good to go again. Let me get my hands on some more drugs". In the thick of his habit John Frusciante was spending \$500 or \$600 a day on cocaine and heroin.

Did you ever run out of money?

"Eventually I ran out of money, yes," he says. "There was a lot of starving and a lot of convincing dealers to front me drugs. There were all kinds of problems that went with that. It was pretty rough. There were times when I would have to be bailed out because I owed someone \$30 000 and they were going to kill me. But the worst thing is having to be sick all the time, that's the worst. I didn't care so much about my personal safety so much as being sick."

When you look back on those days, does it terrify you?

"No, it doesn't terrify me at all," he says. "I'm really proud to have gone through it, actually."

Proud? That's an interesting word to use.

"Well, I'm proud to have come through it," he says. "I'm not so much proud to have done it, but I am proud to have emerged from it. I don't see drugs as my enemy because I know there's no way I will ever go back to them. And because of that I'm very happy with who I am as a person right now."

A lot of your conversation here has centred around the theme of pain. What was the cause of that pain?

"That's too personal a question" says Frusciante, with both a thin smile and a deep frown. "I'm sorry, I can't answer that."

Michael Flea Balzary has swimming pool eyes and an air of ragged intensity that he can't shake, even in front of a perfect stranger brandishing a tape recorder. He's just finished a lunch of local Chinese food, which, he says, was "delicious". Flea prayed, as he always does, before eating the meal. In Australia, he'll tell you, he recently "freaked out" while listening to the album "Los Angeles" by X; lunging around the room and smashing plates to the feral beauty of the music. His daughter, with worried eyes, asked him what was wrong. Dressed in blue jeans and a tight navy Dickies shirt, Flea will sit crosslegged on a sofa for much of this interview.

He isn't new to this. Despite a love for the jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton - from whose band, The Red Hot Peppers, the Red Hot Chili Peppers may or may not have cribbed their name - Flea moved to Los Angeles with his family when he was nine years old, and by the time he was 11 he was spending his life -if not actually living, as his parents always gave him a bed- on the punk rock streets of West Hollywood. This was where he discovered a sense of community that has remained with him till this day. Eleven years old was also the age that he began taking drugs. Right up until the recording of "Blood Sugar Sex Magik" Flea had recorded each and every one of his basslines shitfaced on pot.

I don't know how you managed to stand up.

" Well I think a lot of people smoke pot when they play music," he says, without a smile. "And for me it was a question of becoming meditative and just getting into the space where I played. After I stopped, the music felt a little cold. In time it became more transcendental but in hindsight I would have preferred to have left the drugs alone and worked on making the music transcendental for me from the start"

Flea's accent has the sunshine twang of Southern California. When he was 18 he joined the notorious LA punk band Fear - sample lyric-: 'Steal the money from your mom, buy a gun/kill your mother and father" - and he'll speak of those days with as much energy as he will telling you about his band's new album. Lee Ving Fear's charismatic, red-necked, blue collar frontman, was, he says, like a father figure to him, even though he's since learnt a few things about the man that he doesn't care for. Not that he's keen to discuss them with you, if it's all the same. Unlike Kiedis and Frusciante, Flea was never a junkie.

"But I started doing drugs when I was 11 years old and I didn't stop until I was 31",-he says. "A couple of things made me stop. One of the things was that I got sicker than shit and I was just tired of it. I did heroin, cocaine, psychedelics, and I smoked pot every day. God, I smoked so much pot."

And he had breakdowns as well. Proper crawling-the-walls, bloodied-fingertip breakdowns. The first of these came in 1991. The second came two years ago. The bassist was, he says, "suicidal" He offers all of this as if he were talking to a therapist rather than a journalist.

"I have gone through some things in my life that have led me to the point of absolute collapse and nervous breakdown" he says. "I would say for myself, emotionally, that a couple of years ago I went through a relationship break-up and I was in a place where I didn't trust anyone or anything. I was depressed and miserable and practically suicidal. I couldn't sleep and I was neurotic.

"But I had to suffer so much fear and so much pain that I was able to be really clear headed about it and to say, "Bring it on. Whatever happens to me, just bring it on. I don't care if I die. I'm going to feel all this pain and absorb all this pain". And in doing this I managed to purge myself of all this shit that I've been carrying around all of my life. And I was able to get to a place where I was just this clear and liberated person and I could focus on the things that really mattered to me"

Which are?

"The band. Apart from my family, my friends in the band are what really matters to me."

Back in the journalists' waiting room, By The Way is on its fourth or fifth spin. Sitting down and listening to it, once again, some sense of the accomplishment of this band begins to shine. It's not so much what the album sounds like that is its true achievement, but rather what the Red Hot Chili Peppers have managed to attain, not only with their music but also with their standing. That is, they stand alone.

Only Metallica have managed to shed their peers and contemporaries in quite the same way as the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Metallica are the only other band who or mentions without reference to anyone else

Perhaps more than this, though, it's the sense of unity surrounding the band which is the most remarkable. Each story whether it be Anthony Kiedis and Flea aglow with nu-age redemption, John Frusciante rotting in his room or Chad Smith talking of nothing more than playing goal in a celebrity ice hockey match at the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit -eventually swoops to this point, the point of togetherness, how hard it was to earn and how much it is now cherished. The frictions of the past, they say, are gone; the future is clear. It's not unusual for bands to claim togetherness, but the sheer weight of evidence on display here goes some way resting the case beyond words.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers have been together for 20 years now. Today they sound nothing like they did at the start, without losing sense of authenticity that made it all worthwhile in the first place. They have the smiles and they have the scars. Literally. And while the stories of the past are compelling, it's the music of the present that really keeps them sticking around. "This band means everything to me,-says Anthony Kiedis. "And I think I can speak for each one of us when I say that. There is a chemistry at work when the four of us go into a room that I've just never experienced with anyone else. We've learned from our mistakes and we've grown from our experiences, and I can only see this band getting better and better. I can only see this band sticking around for a long time to come.