

Red hot Chili Peppers- Icons

"Spin" (Aout 2002) - Kate Sullivan
Photographs by Norman Jean Roy

Since the multiplatinum success of their comeback album, Californication, The Red Hot Chili Peppers have kicked behind The Music memories to the curb. More sober than ever, though no less passionate, Los Angeles' bad-boy icons are back - and they may have made the year's best rock record.

Flea has electric blue hair today, which makes his blue eyes really pop. "This journalist asked me yesterday why I dye my hair," he says. "It's either that or Grecian Formula." At 39, the Red Hot Chili Peppers' bassist has had one nervous breakdown, one stress-related illness (he "fell apart" for about a year following the bands breakthrough album, 1991's Blood Sugar Sex Magik), one divorce, and one child (Clara, 13). He is a full-time single father, a yoga practitioner, and ten years clean and sober. "Being a dad is a top-important thing to me," he says. "I really want to be her friend."

Sitting on a couch in Los Angeles' swanky Hotel Bel-Air, Flea eats takeout Thai after a long silent prayer. He cultivates little of the rock-star, wind-in-his-hair, Satan-in-his pants mystique - instead, he's an excitable motormouth and quick to tear up. ("I cry at the news all the time," he admits.) He's also given to happy freakouts, like a recent Christmas meltdown in Australia (where he was born and has a beach house). He explains it his usual way, by spitting run-on sentences like flaming watermelon seeds. Raising his eyebrows and grinning, he resembles Chet Baker's crazed little brother.

"One night I put on X's Los Angeles (the 1980 punk classic) really loud, and I just had a total epiphany about why I wanted to play rock music in the first place. I started jumping around and threw my plate against the wall! I was smashing shit. My daughter was like, 'Papa! What's the matter with you?' I threw myself on the ground. I was on the verge of tears, but also of ecstasy."

What X means to Flea is deeply rooted in L.A. Before Jane's Addiction, hip-hop, or Beck, X were an L.A. band who rocked heroically and poetically about the L.A. we all lived in but never saw in the movies. That L.A. was an ethnic cacophony without equal; economically dysfunctional, yet throbbing with immigrant energy. It was dingy and romantic, tinged with bohemian squalor and dreams of Hollywood immortality, infected by a chronic loneliness.

"You know what L.A. is to me?" Flea asks. "It's that bird that goes, oooh-ah-oooh, ooh-ooh." He mimics the low coos of a mourning dove. The Peppers captured all of that melancholy and joyless drugging in their early-90s ballad "Under the Bridge," and some of it on 1999's quadruple-platinum Californication, a bittersweet mix of sexy, sunny exuberance and grown-up regret. The album's MTV hit was the mid-tempo wail "Scar Tissue," whose video showed the physically battered band members driving a rusty convertible through the desert. It also featured exquisite vocal harmonies and slide guitar lines from prodigal member John Frusciante.

Frusciante's emergence on Californication (after a six year absence due to a near-fatal drug addiction) has deepened the emotional core of the band's music. "John being back makes a huge difference," says producer Rick Rubin. "He's brimming with ideas, and he lives and breathers music more than anyone I've ever seen in my life." Frusciante's song writing has helped Flea and singer Anthony Kiedis (whose voice sounds better than ever) capture a more complete vision of their L.A. "The soul of this city is a huge part of who we are," says Flea, "and I think the soul of this city is an old and beautiful thing."

The new album, By The Way, wonderfully evokes L.A.'s and the Chili Peppers', essence, both damaged and optimistic. Swooning, beachy harmonies, Beatlesque chord progressions, Motown drumming, new wave synths, non-schmaltzy strings. Plus, Kiedis' daring and expressionistic lyrics just sound much more personal. ("He's really outdid himself," says Rubin.) There are 60's and 80's currents throughout, thanks mostly to Frusciante. (He handle all keyboards, vocal harmonies, and guitars.) The Chili Peppers talk about "serving the song" (Flea) and "getting out fo the way of the song" (drummer Chad Smith). They're listening to one another, and their sound is changing. By The Way's sonic vibrancy, as well asa its maturity, sounds like a band being reborn.

By now, most of you are familiar with the Chili Peppers' back-story. How Kiedis and Flea met at Los Angeles' diverse Fairfax High in the late 70's, formed the band, and carried on after guitarist Hillel Slovak died of a heroin overdose in 1988 (original drummer Jack Irons quit after Slovak's death and was replaced by Smith). How Kiedis was still struggling with heroin (and Flea was far from sober) when Frusciante, a teenage guitar prodigy and obsessive Chili Peppers fan, joined; and how the band exploded with Blood Sugar Sex Magik, its fifth album. How Frusciante later quit to become a full-time junkie (replaced by Dave Navarro for 1995's One Hot Minute) but finally cleaned up and returned for Californication, and how everyone became even more rich and famous.

Those are the raw facts. But the truth of the Chili Peppers' story is specific to the crucible where their young lives were shaped - public schoolyards, punk-rock parking lots, jazz-gigs, and proto-rap clubs downtown. There was a moment in early 80's L.A. when several musical movements were happening all at once, and to kids like the Chili Peppers, boundaries didn't much matter. Their initial sound was a mash-up of everything they heard.

"Anthony and I were street kids, basically," says Flea, who was mostly raised by his mom and stepfather, a jazz bassist and volatile alcoholic (like his biological father). At 11, Kiedis left his mom's home in Michigan to live with his father, aspiring actor Blackie Dammett. Dammett went on to have supporting roles in films (Lethal Weapon, Doctor Detroit) and on TV (Starky and Hutch, Night Court).

"I had a very violent upbringing," says Flea. "[My stepfather] had shoot-outs with the cops. I slept in the backyard because I was scared. In a way, it gave me freedom. By the time I was 12 or 13, I was out until three or four in the morning, carousing, on drugs."

Kiedis and Flea were into funk, jazz, and early funk/rock hybrids like Parliament/Funkadelic and Sly and the Family Stone. At 12, Flea's mom took him to see his idol, bebop jazzman Dizzy Gillespie. "I snuck backstage, and there's Dizzy, holding his trumpet, talking to someone," Flea says excitedly. "I run up to him, and I'm like [looks up with wide eyes], 'Mr. Gillespie.' And I can't even talk. I'm in awe. And he just puts his arm around me and hugs me real tight, so my head's kind of in his armpit. He smile and just holds me there for, like, five minutes while he talks. I'm just frozen in joy - oh my God, oh my God, oh my

God."

The boys' wasted youth began for real when Kiedis and Flea discovered the legendary West Hollywood punk/hippie/rock nexus, the Starwood. "We were hanging out in the parking lot, mostly," says Kiedis, "trying to sneak into Germs and Black Flag and Circle Jerks shows."

"We weren't cool enough to get in," Flea adds, grinning. "One time we painted ourselves in my mother's lipstick and went out stark naked."

In the early '80s, Kiedis saw Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five. "It was mind-blowing," he says. "I subconsciously vowed I would somehow create that type of energy to entertain others. I didn't have a clue how to write a song or sing, but I thought I could probably figure out how to tell a story in rhythm."

Onstage, the early Chili Peppers were a chaotic spazzfest - guitar noise, slapdash bass, nudity, carefully placed socks, and Kiedis' hilarious attempts to rap repartee. But Kiedis says that band's sound - which has spawned legions of imitators - was never premeditated. "Nothing's ever been conscious, especially not at that pint, because we were pretty high most of the time. Even now, when we get together, there's never a discussion of what we're doing. We just close our eyes and start playing."

Unfortunately, almost twenty years later, the band's intuitive hybrid has borne some sour fruit. "I don't think any of those conservative ultra-aggro, rap-metal bands had the funk influence or punk-rock energy that we had," Kiedis says with uncharacteristic vehemence. "Even when I was 14, I didn't have such one-dimensional angst."

"I love you!" The teenage boy in the crowd makes a heart shape with his hands and points at Anthony Kiedis. The boy has a blond crew cut and a girl close by, but he's totally crushed out on the Chili Peppers' singer. "Thank you," Kiedis says flatly - which means he really mean it. "Those are beautiful words at a time like this. A man can get insecure under all these fluorescent lights."

This is some weird show. To promote *By the Way*, the Chili Peppers are doing one of those dodgy, unreality-TV "surprise" concerts for MTV, held in a skate park in Orange County. The modest crowd sings along with the 45-minute set, but plenty of people stand blank-faced.

"Where are we, the City of Orange?" Kiedis asks. The crowd almost cheers. "Where is that? Is that near Fullerton? I get behind the Orange Curtain, and it's all a blur." Vague crowd noise. (You know it's bad when the audience doesn't even realize it's being insulted.) The band works through a set of hits sprinkled with new songs. Flea jumps around, wobbling his head, while Smith tosses his sticks, Tommy Lee-style; Kiedis paces fiercely, and Frusciante tries to find the magic friction, but the crowd is cold.

When Kiedis ducks offstage, Flea plucks out a bass line and Smith kicks in with a funky drumbeat. Flea and Frusciante walk toward each other, staring, as Frusciante plays little notes here and there off Flea's snaky bass line. The audience warms up, cheering. After a second or two, a slightly ominous groove emerges for 30 seconds or so. Kiedis reenters watching intently. This is how a lot of Chili Peppers songs are born. These guys are musical soulmates, and the chemistry between them is so strong, it's pretty much sexual.

When I interview Kiedis back at the Hotel Bel-Air, he's wearing a long sleeve, black California T-shirt. He's the most guarded of the Chili Peppers in interviews - cold without being rude. It's nothing personal; he just likes to be in control. And considering how ridiculously fit he is for 39, and that he's a self-described type-A personality, he's probably harder on himself than on anybody else.

He's been through a lot since *Californication*, and it's all there in the lyrics: "There's loss," he says, "but also joy and love and that little burst of euphoria when the whole world makes sense for about 30 second." Kiedis' ex-girlfriend, clothing designer Yohanna Logan, inspired many of those epiphanies. (They broke up during the making of the album; he wanted kids, and she didn't) So did his dear friend/mentor/fellow smack survivor, Gloria Scott, who died of cancer around the same time. The song "Venice Queen" is written for her.

"I'm good at losing," Kiedis says, "It's one of my specialties."

At that moment, Frusciante appears at the French doors of the hotel suite. His hair is shiny, and he's wearing a '70s-style tracksuit.

"What's up, Johnny?" asks Kiedis. "How are you? You hungry?"

"No," Frusciante replies quietly.

"Did you get my message, John?"

"No, I can't check my machine."

"I had a feeling," says Kiedis. "I thought you would've called me back. I was so excited about our rehearsal yesterday. I was feeling so good to have heard you play, and I was worried from our earlier conversation that you didn't realize how much I appreciated everything."

According to bandmates, Kiedis' communication skills have improved remarkably in recent years - as have everyone's. "I feel like a new band," Kiedis says. "When we get together to rehearse, we could write music together all day long - good music."

"Anthony's changed like crazy," Frusciante says later. "He realizes the power he has to hurt people or to nurture them. Before, you never knew - one day he was your friends, the next day he wasn't."

If you were to think of John Frusciante as a vegetable, chili peppers would not come to mind. Beet, perhaps. Strange and sweet, grows in the dark, bleeds easily. During the MTV concert, Frusciante cut the tip of his finger bending a string. When the

band's road manager put some disinfectant on it later, Frusciante emitted a long, loud waaaaa. Apparently, he has a low pain threshold. This man, ravaged his body with needles, this living Lazarus, held up his finger as if he just needed someone to kiss it.

In a group of damaged people, Frusciante, 32, stands out as the most damaged of all. But he also has the most intense spiritual life: He speaks often of a guardian spirit and says that when he was closest to death during his heroin addiction, he was visited regularly by figures from the other side. "I was so happy someone was visiting; I'd make food for them," he says. "When they were gone, I'd cry."

After quitting the band on the Blood Sugar tour, Frusciante returned to L.A. and recorded a solo album while diving into heroin addiction with frightful determination. "When I originally decided to become a drug addict, it was a clear decision," he says. "I was very sad, and I was always happy when I was on drugs; therefore, I [thought I] should be on drugs all the time. I was never guilty - I was always really proud to be an addict."

Frusciante ventured close to the edge. But whether he knew it or not, he didn't descend into the void alone - he took little bits of Flea and Kiedis with him. None of them will get over the experience anytime soon, if ever.

"You just don't do what John did - and live," Flea says, awed. It's not only that their bandmate is back - but that his talent seems more staggering than ever. "John is the greatest musician in the world," adds Flea. Says Kiedis: "The artistic center of his brain is pretty much all of his brain."

That's clear as I talk to Frusciante on the hotel's private patio under the blinding sunlight.

Spin: So the record's really pretty.

Frusciante: Oh, thanks.

Did you have a lot to do with that?

Well, I spent a lot of time after the last tour furthering my understanding of chord theory and learning Beatles and Charles Mingus and Burt Bacharach songs. But I've got more to learn.

You don't worry you'll ruin your muse with too much knowledge?

Absolutely not. It just leads to making music with a wider variety of emotion. It makes me see even more how infinite music is.

[I pull out some sunscreen.] Do you want any?

Okay. I like the [SPF] 45 for my arms. My arms are in bad shape.

He chuckles, takes off his jacket. His arms are severely scarred, as if he's reached into a fire. They remind me of traveling in Europe, visiting old battlefields now covered in grass; you know something violent happened there. "It's actually more from coke than from heroin," he says. "Coke you're shooting every five minutes. That's what did it to me."

Did you know as a kid that you wanted to be a rock musician?

Well, it was put to me by "that guy" [the guardian spirit] when I was like, four. So I went into my parents' record collection and I found a rock'n'roll compilation. And when my mom asked if I wanted to move to L.A. I said "Yeah," because I knew that was where the rock stars were. I was seven. Then when I found punk and listened to the Germs I started seeing how I was part of this. I remember being out on the baseball field, I started making up an angry punk song in my head, and I went home and wrote, like, 20 songs in a row. I realized it didn't even matter if I knew how to play guitar yet.

Did you ever struggle as a beginning song writer?

Oh, yeah. But I realized that there is a way to hold onto something that doesn't exist yet. That's what takes place when a song is written; you see something that isn't there. Then you use your instrument to find it.

It's Saturday evening in east Hollywood, and the Silverlake Conservatory of Music has just completed its first spring recital. The school is a small storefront establishment located between a Mexican grocery and gay-friendly antique shop on East Sunset. Flea founded it last year to provide people in the area with affordable music lessons.

The crowd milling about tonight is a multicultural mix typical for the neighborhood and includes several of Flea's personal employees and their families. There are also numerous thirtysomethings who've run in concentric circles with the Chili Peppers' gang since high school and now have kids of their own. Lots of survivors- of harsh 1970s childhoods, divorce, drugs.

Chatting in the hall, dean Keith Barry (a.k.a. "Tree," Flea's oldest friend) agrees that his generation - that is, the Chili Peppers' - suffered quite a bit in the past. That's partly because of a lack of havens like the conservatory. "As many places like this as we can create for kids, there will always be a need as long as people keep having kids."

The school is a symbol of, and a fit to, Flea's dream city and the environment that shaped the Chili Peppers.

"The fact that people can stay sincere and have joy in their lives in the face of phoniness or economic elitism is a testament to the spirit of Los Angeles," says Flea. "Whether it be street kids from broken homes like me and Anthony, or victims of huge racism like the black community, or the Mexican community, crawling across the border just to survive. There are pockets where all these people come together and line up in a creative and vibrant atmosphere, and that's that Los Angeles I love."

He says he plans to hit up the "guilty rich people" he's friends with and make admission to the conservatory free. Being here, you can feel that this tiny school could become an institution, the kind of place that anchors a neighborhood and even anchors lives.

"The thing that survives has to be really beautiful," says Flea, "and have a really substantial core to it. And it has to be determined to stick to its guns and so what it's gonna do."

He's talking about L.A., but he's also talking about his band - since in his heart, the two are inseparable. You see, even in

Hollywood, people's roots eventually grow together.

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