

Red Hot Chili Peppers - Smug And Rude Are The Boys In The Nude

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When Anthony Kiedis, the singer with the Red Hot Chili Peppers, asked a New Wave ensemble playing in a Detroit night club if some of the Peppers could grab a quick cameo spot, he was instantly rebuffed.

"Hey, these're new instruments our parents just bought for us," smugly explained one of the punk youths. "We'd rather not have you messing with our sensitive equipment." The Red Hot Chili Peppers - all ex-street toughs - didn't stand for the insult. Kiedis still laughs when he recalls what happened: "We said, 'Thank you very much!' and took all their instruments away from 'em anyway," said the 23-year-old rap vocalist in a recent interview.

Then, while the fledglings watched in horror, the Peppers bumped and ground through what Kiedis described as "the rockiest tunes that little club ever witnessed. We tore the place to pieces!" The impromptu concert was celebrated in Detroit newspapers the next day as "the guerrilla warfare gig," so Kiedis and company left town as heroes. But for an undisciplined outfit that usually closes its R&B-frenzied shows by appearing in the nude (except for socks in strategic places), it was just one more minor coup. "We certainly do walk the tightrope of fruitcakeitude," Kiedis said.

On his own since he was 15, the L.A.-raised, poetry-writing Kiedis found inspiration in his wild nights on Hollywood Boulevard. Witnessing a multitude of cultures and musical styles, he soon centered his attention on the brand of funk first popularized by George Clinton's Parliament/Funkadelic in the mid-'70s. Two friends from high school (guitarist Hillel Slovak and a bassist known as "Flea") felt the same way, and birthed the band in '83 by adding drummer Cliff Martinez.

"I could really wrap my poems around that rhythmic beat," said Kiedis, whose vocals mimic soul style from Joe Tex grunts to Sly Stone crooning. Admitting such varied black artists as Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley and Miles Davis as lesser influences, he added that, "only the low-down dirtiest funk could make me feel like my heart was gonna jump out of my chest, or that my feet could move like Fred Astaire's. Plus it had a nasty, dirty-dog sort of philosophy towards life."

And that philosophy stressed sex. Thus, their performances are often spiked with off-color phrases and lewd antics, mostly from Kiedis. During the band's sweat-drenched act, his stage gear is pared down to oddball simplicity - tennis shoes and a skimpy skirt made from an American flag.

"It's very stylish - it has all these stars and stripes," Kiedis enthused over his Old Glory garb, under which he wears nothing at all. "I've even hung upside down from ceiling pipes at clubs and let the skirt fall down over my face, giving the audience a new view of my nakedness."

Kiedis goes to such extremes, he claims, for "shock value . . . We do it to get people's attention. It's also a strong sense of human freedom to play nude," he added, telling of a live Eurovision broadcast from Frankfurt, Germany, where the Chili Peppers' unclothed behinds were beamed into more than 20 million homes. And, according to Kiedis, people were there in person shouting, "Wunderbar!"

Naturally, such behavior has made them a must-see on the hip college circuit. And the band has toured tirelessly to build an audience. Getting sparse airtime, their records (1984's self-titled debut and last year's "Freaky Styley") sell mainly on the strength of their unpredictable live electricity.

Strangely enough, Kiedis reports the group rarely gets into trouble, cheered rather than criticized for its outlandish approach to ethnic music. Lyrically, they even openly slag other pretenders to the funk throne such as Duran Duran. But the few detractors the group does have seem to be members of their own race.

"We never get hassles from blacks," said Kiedis, calculating at least 10 percent of their fans to be serious funksters. "There's a minority of small-minded white people who think we should play rock 'n' roll because we're white." The Peppers' work never bothered George Clinton, the self-proclaimed "Maggot Overlord" of funk, whom the Chili Peppers asked to produce "Freaky Styley." The great granddaddy of the distinctive sound - which updated James Brown's urgency in a punkish motif and paved the way for rap and scratch - was convinced after one listen to the group's first tape.

The Peppers are proud that the resultant effort sounds as rhythmic as Parliament/Funkadelic's early material. But daring to step into all black territory has been as natural to them as taking instruments away from understudies. Or getting their socks yanked off during encores.

"Our vision has always stood on its own," summarized Kiedis, who was preparing for a fast vacation in Hawaii before launching into another Stateside tour. "Growin' up together, we all knew we wanted to make something as funky as our hearts could offer. We wanted to freak out and have a good time, and that's what we've done."

The Red Hot Chili Peppers will play Wolfgang's Thursday night.

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