

Dave Navarro - Beyond Addiction

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Clean and Sober Dave Navarro lives for today with the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

L.A. is burning. A series of wickedly devastating brushfires have encircled the City of Angels, turning the surrounding hills into a raging inferno. But Dave Navarro looks implacably cool as he pilots his black Harley down Ventura Boulevard. The guitarist's newly sprouted goatee gives him a conquistador's air of stony self-possession as he glides along the wide thoroughfare. A bandanna and shades protect his hair and eyes from the pall of smoke and cinders that have made the city's air seem like the mouth of a badly vented fireplace.

Angelenos have learned not to let catastrophe interrupt their daily lives, and Navarro is no exception. His bike safely stashed in a "Loading Only" zone, the guitarist enters a trendy coffeehouse--one of those self-consciously bohemian places that could only exist in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley. Settling onto a worn antique sofa, he orders a cup of black decaf and a bowl of cereal moistened with fruit juice. "I don't eat dairy," he explains. "No caffeine either. Right now, this is my only vice..." He smiles as he lights the first of many cigarettes.

Studying the self-confident, purposeful guy seated at my side, I can't help but contrast him with the Dave Navarro I interviewed two years ago [GW, September '91]. At that time, he was a slaving, incoherent wreck, badly strung out on heroin and unable to even locate his shoes. During that interview, while waiting to be taken to a rehabilitation center, he announced that he was leaving Jane's Addiction, a move that precipitated the band's subsequent demise.

It seemed a premature and messy end to a band that many thought would be the voice of a generation. Fans and friends wished Dave all the best in his rehab and his plans for a new band called Deconstruction, with Jane's bassist Eric Avery. But to all appearances, Navarro seemed fated to go down in the books as another of those rock and roll flames that flare up suddenly, burn brilliantly for a very short time and then fizzle out.

Cut to late 1993: The Deconstruction album is completed and ready for release. Navarro is clean and healthy. And, he has just become the new guitarist for another powerhouse L.A. band: the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Dave's ascension to Pepperdom is a surprising development, but a logical one. The guitarist's brand of crazy intensity, as well as his liquid leads and kinetic rhythm feel, make him a perfect successor to the Pepper's axe throne--a seat that has so far belonged to six other musicians. But what about Deconstruction ?

"Eric and I decided to make that a project rather than an ongoing band," Navarro explains. "We decided to put out one record and then move on, amicably."

Which of course left Navarro free to accept the Pepper's challenge. He seems just the man to bring an exciting new edge to the band's brawny blend of funk and rock. But what about the "family curse" that seems to hang over the Red Hot Chili Peppers' guitarists? Hillel Slovak died, John Frusciante went a bit loony, Arik Marshall apparently wasn't loony enough, and nobody knows why Jesse Tobias lasted only a month or so. Navarro, however, has the look of a survivor -- a guy who's faced some heavy trials early in life and has emerged stronger and more determined than ever. If anyone can stay the course, it's him.

GUITAR WORLD: Why did you leave Jane's Addiction ?

DAVE NAVARRO: I don't know if you have enough tape to record my answer to that. To put it simply, it was just time to move on. We all wanted different things. I still respect everybody in that band and I'm happy for their success in whatever they're doing. I think Lollapalooza, which was our final tour, was a great end to that band. We didn't struggle with a follow-up record that nobody was interested in and we had to push. And also, at that point I needed to get my personal life together. That part of it had nothing to do with music. I had to make my personal life my first priority. Because without that, my music was nothing.

GUITAR WORLD: I guess everybody knows you went through a pretty intense drug period then.

There were drugs, yes. But that was an attempted cure. It wasn't the cause. You know what I mean ? I used drugs as a cure, but there was a cause that I was unaware of that was creating problems in my life. That was what I had to take care of.

GUITAR WORLD: How did you get the gig with the Chili Peppers ?

I've known those guys for years. We've always played on the same circuit. Jane's Addiction and the Chili Peppers ended up playing on the same show a lot of the times. So we knew each other and had a lot of mutual respect. Then about a year ago, Flea and I got together and jammed with Henry Rollins and Steve Perkins, and we both said that we wanted to play together again at some point. A year went by, and about a week after Eric and I decided to make Deconstruction a one record project, Flea called me up and asked if I wanted to jam again. So I went down to their rehearsal place in the Valley. Chad Smith, the drummer, was there. We started playing and it felt really good. Then Anthony Keidis came down and we just really dug each other. They asked "How would you feel about playing with the band ?" I said "Sure, I'd love to."

GUITAR WORLD: What kind of stuff did you jam on ?

Oh, I don't know. Flea would call out a key and we'd just go. It would be everything from real funky Chili Pepper type stuff to

hard rock to very surreal, spacey music. Whatever would happen. Whatever would flow. We didn't have any preconceived ideas. That's one thing I like about jamming with those guys: There's never any preconceptions.

GUITAR WORLD: Do you know what happened with Jesse Tobias? First they announced that he was the new guitarist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Then all of a sudden, he was out and you were in.

I don't know what happened. And, to be honest, I try not to know. It's not my business. I'm sure if I asked they'd tell me. But it's like I said to Rolling Stone, whenever I meet a new girlfriend I don't want to know about her old boyfriends right off the bat. I hear Jesse's a pretty talented guy. I hope he does well.

GUITAR WORLD: Have you begun writing new material with the Chili Peppers ?

Yeah, we just started. I've only been in the band a month and we're still feeling each other out. I played with Steve Perkins for a lot of years and now I have to find out what Chad Smith is all about. And Flea's a completely different bass player than Eric. So I had to re-adapt. And they have to adapt to me to. I also have to learn the old material, so we've been going over a lot of that, just to get fluent with one another and start to understand each other as players. But we're also just jamming and coming up with new stuff. If we like something, we keep the idea. So to answer your question, there are some songs that are almost finished and others that are still just in the idea stage. All the music I've ever written with anyone has been very collaborative; a lot of it has always come from just jamming. I'm not the kind of guy who goes home, writes a song and then comes in the next day and says, "Here it is." And none of the guys I've ever worked with have been that way -- except for Perry Farrell.

GUITAR WORLD: Will your guitar playing in the Red Hot Chili Peppers be in any way similar to Jane's Addiction ?

It won't sound like Jane's Addiction, if that's what you mean. One of the things that's going to be very interesting is that I'm not a funk guitar player. I mean I can play funk guitar. But I don't think they necessarily want me to come in and do that. What I want to do is find a marriage between what I naturally do and what they naturally do. Hopefully that will be something really unique.

GUITAR WORLD: What kind of approach are you taking to the Chili Pepper's old songs ? Are you looking to recreate the original guitar parts ? Or do you want to take it to a whole different place ?

I'm keeping it pretty faithful. I respect John's playing and don't want to rewrite what he did. It's obviously going to have my sound, and no two guitar player's attack is the same. But I think what he wrote is great. I wouldn't want to repaint a great work of art just to put my own little slant on it; and I respect his playing as being art. So I just want to get the songs out there. If I did whatever I wanted with them, nobody would recognize what they were. But I don't want to take away from John's efforts, or from the audience's enjoyment of their favorite old Chili Peppers songs when we play them live. But then again, the guitar solos will be mine and the flavorings will be mine. The songs will be ours and his.

GUITAR WORLD: How do you feel about coming into a situation where Flea and Anthony are such dominant personalities? People think of them as the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

I'm pretty comfortable with that. I came from a band where the front guy was thought of as Jane's Addiction. Like I said before, I never got into this business for nationwide recognition and stardom. I didn't want to be hailed as anything in particular. I just wanted to play -- I'm equally happy doing my part, whether they're strong front people or not. But at the same time, I don't want to intentionally get all humble and hide in the background; I'm not into that either. I'll just go out there and play, and if one guy gets looked at more than me, I'm happy for him. I don't have any animosity about that.

GUITAR WORLD: So it feels like a band ?

Yeah, it does. I get along with the guys great and we hang out when we're not playing. It's really nice. It's like a whole new world for me, in terms of a band situation.

GUITAR WORLD: Speaking of bands, have you heard Porno for Pyros? And if so, what do you think ?

Yeah, I heard them, and I like them. I think they're good.

GUITAR WORLD: Peter DiStefano admires you quite a bit, actually. When I interviewed him recently, he couldn't say enough good things about you.

That's really nice. I think Porno for Pyros are good, too. But to tell you the truth, I only listened to the record once. And I said, "Yeah, it sounds like Perry and Steve, and there are some interesting things happening on guitar and bass." But it wasn't a record I wanted to give myself to -- for obvious emotional reasons. It's kind of painful, in a wierd way. I want the greatest things for them. I want them to be huge, or whatever they want to be -- as long as I don't have to hear about it. It's not coming from a place of jealousy. It's more like when you break up with a girlfriend and she's in a new relationship. You want it to work out, so she's happy. But you don't want to go to dinner and run into them. That's kind of how I look at Porno for Pyros. Like, I don't clean my house and put on their CD and bounce around.

GUITAR WORLD: Do you put anything on when you clean your house ?

Well, lately it's always been the Chili Peppers. And a lot of Parliament and Funkadelic. I'm listening to bands that will give me a crash course in what the Chili Peppers' background is. I can't fully understand them if I only listen to their music. I have to listen to what they love. It's music that I love, too, though I've never really listened to Parliament a whole lot in the past. It wasn't interesting to me because when I first got into guitar I wanted to hear bands that had a lot of guitar in your face, and I didn't find that on Parliament records. But now that I'm older, and I understand about underplaying and how less can be more, that stuff really intrigues me. This has opened up a whole new area of music that I can get into. It's exciting.

GUITAR WORLD: Does funk demand a different kind of technique or approach from a guitarist ?

I don't know, but I can do it. Some Jane's Addiction stuff was funky, though I wouldn't say it was funk. It was like white man's funk. It was cute and clever. But I've never really had a problem trying to play a certain way. When I was really young, I'd sit around and try to imitate all the techniques I could find. Then I stopped doing that completely. I stopped relying so much on technique, but it was there if I needed it. So, if I needed to, I could do a Malmsteen riff on a song. I don't think I ever would though; I can't imagine where that would be called for. Unless I did some kind of comedy record.

GUITAR WORLD: Which guitarists were important to you during your formative years ?

When I was really young, it was always Jimi Hendrix. And it still is. But in between, I listened to a lot of Eddie Van Halen. Yngwie Malmsteen was real fascinating to me for a brief period. And then Robert Smith from the Cure and Daniel Ash from Love and Rockets and Bauhaus. I loved their simplicity.

GUITAR WORLD: People who are into technique often frown on that kind of stuff.

That flangy chording ? I love that. It complements the music so perfectly. Unnecessary guitar soloing all over the place takes away from the song. When the singer's trying to express sentiment or something deeply valued and there's some guy twiddling away on top of it, it defeats the purpose. So I learned a lot from guys like Daniel Ash and Robert Smith. And I always loved all the different guitarists that have been in Siouxsie and the Banshees. I got into some gloomy death rock for awhile. And then I got into only classical music. But the great innovators, for me, are still Hendrix and Page. I really liked what they did, because their bands weren't just one thing. The Experience and Zeppelin were anything they wanted to be. Now I don't really listen to music, so I couldn't tell you who I like now. No--wait. I actually think John Frusciante is amazing. I think he's really underrated as a guitar player. I don't know if that's because, as you said, Flea and Anthony have such strong personalities, and they tend to be the focal point of the band, or if it's because people who aren't musicians don't understand what's behind John's playing. But I think that guy's a genius. In a way I'm sorry it didn't work out with him and the Chili Peppers because I would have loved to hear what he was going to do with them next. But I'm happy that I'm playing with them now.

GUITAR WORLD: Did you ever get a chance to see John play with the Red Hot Chili Peppers ?

No. You know, I never really went to see the Chili Peppers. I saw them in the old days, but I don't really go to concerts now. I went to the Henry Rollins concert last night -- because he's a good friend of mine and Chris [Haskett], the guitar player, is a good friend of mine. They don't live here, so it was more an opportunity to hang out with them rather than going to see a band. Pretty much any band puts me to sleep.

GUITAR WORLD: Why is that ?

Many different reasons. One is that I'd rather be playing than watching. It's like when you watch a porno film, you want to have sex; you don't want to watch porno films. The other thing is that when I'm home I never listen to an album all the way through. I'll put on a song or two. So the idea of getting on my bike and driving who knows where and dealing with the parking, the heat, the hoards of people, straining to see, all the noise and sweatiness and smoke in there...all to hear an hour-and-a-half of a band I would never listen to an hour-and-a-half of on my own -- it just doesn't seem like it's worth the effort. I don't get excited when I see shows. I get excited at them when I'm playing.

GUITAR WORLD: You mentioned Jimmy Page earlier. One hears a lot of his influence in your playing on the Jane's Addiction albums.

Yeah. I've heard people say that. But it's never been a conscious thing. I think I more consciously tried to copy guys like Daniel Ash than Jimmy Page. But then again we're talking about roots that have been in my soul since I was 11. And if it comes out, that's great. I'd much rather be told, "You sound like Jimmy Page" than "You sound like Rick Nielsen." I think Jane's Addiction had a lot of similarities to Led Zeppelin, anyway. No two songs were alike. There were moments for beauty and for roughness, for funk and rock and almost heavy metal-like playing. So in that sense, I think those comparisons are quite accurate. But when I listen to Jane's Addiction, I don't think it sounds like Led Zeppelin.

GUITAR WORLD: A lot of people see you as someone who really changed rock guitar in the nineties.

That's really nice. I have never met any of them, but thanks. People often comment to me on how my gear setup has always been very basic. They're surprised at how basic it is. And, in some ways, other guitarists have tried to imitate that sound because I have such a simple setup. But the truth is that has nothing to do with what I'm trying to accomplish as an artist. I basically just don't understand the equipment that's coming out now. And I don't want to understand it. It's intimidating. I don't want a computer on stage with me -- I want an amp. I don't want to have to start doing calculus if I need to do something spontaneous on stage. I had a [Roland] GP-8 once. I fucked with one thing for about an hour then I threw my hands up in the air and said, "I hate this."

GUITAR WORLD: Are you still doing a lot of wah stuff ?

Yeah. I love wah. But I'm not using echo as much as I have in the past. My setup right now is still really simple. I'm just running a Marshall JCM 900 and I also have a Bogner Ecstasy. I have a Boss Chorus, a wah wah and an echo box, and that's about it.

GUITAR WORLD: What kind of wah wah pedal do you use ?

I have three different ones: a Hendrix Crybaby, a regular Crybaby and a modified Crybaby that a guitar tech tweaked to make the envelope wider. I just go back and forth between those. It's not that I'm so technical that I know which one I need for which song. I like the Hendrix one a lot; it's got a little more low end to it.

GUITAR WORLD: Does this thing with the Chili Peppers feel permanent ?

It's like I said to MTV: It's permanent today. But I'm not one to project or to decide what the future's going to hold. I'm a fully fledged member today. I'm not going to worry about what will happen tomorrow. I'm trying to do what's in front of me.

GUITAR WORLD: It's an interesting slot to be in. There have been an awful lot of Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarists.

Yeah, but that's not why I have this philosophy about it. It's not like I feel something horrible is looming in my future because I joined this band.

GUITAR WORLD: So you don't fear the Curse of the Chili Peppers ?

No. Definitely not.

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