

GUITAR ONE, AOÛT 99

RED HOT ONCE AGAIN ! par Dale Turner

"Every time you put on a record or a CD," guitarist John Frusciante explains, "it's a dimension in time; it's a piece of time that's suddenly moved from one dimension to another. A moment in 1927, or a series of moments that accumulated into being one song in 1967, suddenly appears again in 1999 because I press a button. That's like dying and waking up in another world." Truth be told, Frusciante, who first joined the Red Hot Chili Peppers back in 1988, only to leave the band mid-tour in 1992, did almost die, but he woke up in this world to return to the Pepper fold with a vengeance. What many regard as the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "classic lineup" - Anthony Kiedis (vocals), Flea (bass), Chad Smith (drums), and John Frusciante (guitar) - spent the summer of '98 jamming in Flea's garage, and the rest of the fall and winter writing and recording Californication: an album unmistakably akin to the band's 1991 breakthrough, BloodSugarSexMagik. If Pepper fans were surprised to hear that John Frusciante would once again be playing alongside Flea and company, they couldn't have been any more surprised than the guitarist himself, who just a few short years ago would 've been the last to predict such news. Back in May 1992, in the middle of the Red Hot Chili Peppers' tour of Japan, and with a stint on Lollapalooza II lurking on the horizon, John Frusciante suddenly decided it was time to pack up and go home. And for much of the next seven years, his Los Angeles home is where he would stay. The Peppers went through a string of replacements in his stead - Zander Schloss, Arik Marshall, and Jesse Tobias - before finally settling on the ethereal guitar stylings of former Jane's Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro to propel their successful follow-up, One Hot Minute.

Frusciante, meanwhile, returned to focusing on his primary passion - continuing his quest to capture the "colors" that swirled in his mind and wrench them from his massive collection of vintage guitars. For a while, he enjoyed a period of self-inflicted isolation, intense introspection, and fertile creativity - immortalized on a pair of inspired-yet-haunting solo discs - but eventually a bout with depression took hold that literally prevented him from engaging in the very thing he enjoyed the most : playing guitar. John Frusciante took the road less traveled and soon found himself in a downward spiral of drug addiction that eventually took a near-fatal toll - ironically, almost facing the same fate as the very guitarist he'd replaced back in 1988, the late Hillel Slovak. In the end, he lost almost everything. Today, with his demons at bay and a new Chili Peppers album hitting the streets, a rehabilitated and reinvigorated John Frusciante is more focused and more productive on his instrument than ever. Fresh from an afternoon yoga class, between rehearsals with his Red Hot buddies for the band's upcoming tour (which features a stint at Woodstock), John hung out with GuitarOne to give us his perspective on where he's been, where he is now, and where he sees himself and the band going.

Who first approached you with the idea of replacing Dave Navarro - or, in effect, having you replace your own replacement ?

Flea and I were just hanging out at my house for a while listening to records, and at one point he asked me how I'd feel about being in the Chili Peppers again. We started talking about it, and we both got excited. A couple of weeks later, we started playing in his garage, and it went really well right away I hadn't been friends with Anthony very much over the last seven years, but when I saw him a few times during the few months before I joined the band, I felt like, "This is a person I can definitely be good friends with." I never felt so comfortable around him before - and we've ended up being really good friends; now he's one of my favorite people in the world. And that was the only way Flea would've wanted me to be in the band : if we were all gonna get along like that, not if Anthony and I were gonna be hating each other. Flea and I had been friends the whole time, but our different lifestyles stopped us from being able to keep our musical relationship as strong as both of us would've liked it to be. It made him really sad to be around me a lot of the time.

After you left the Chili Peppers, you played with Flea in something called Three Amoebas, didn't you ?

That was just me and Flea jamming with people; me and him and Stephen Perkins [drummer, Jane's Addiction] used to jam a lot. We decided to call ourselves "Three Amoebas" as a thing to write down on the tapes of the jams that we would record.

Ever plan on doing anything with those recordings ?

We wanted to, but Warner Bros. didn't want to release them. I guess I can understand why. I mean, they're all like half-hour long jams without stopping, and we don't want to edit them up. It's really great playing, but it's not something that a big label would want to release.

Do you have any opinion of the work Dave Navarro did on One Hot Minute while you were away?

No. I don't have an opinion of it. I've never heard it.

Aren't you going to have to learn some songs from One Hot Minute to play on your upcoming tour?

No. We're not gonna play anything off One Hot Minute, and probably not even Mother's Milk [Frusciante's first album with the Chili Peppers]. We'll play a few songs from some of the earlier albums - stuff Hillel played on that's in the same vibe as what we're doing now - and some songs from the first demo the way Hillel played them, not Jack Sherman [guitarist who recorded on the band's self-titled debut].

You first joined the Peppers back in 1988 at age 18 and immediately became an international rock star. What was that experience like ?

It was fun. We had a good time. We were at a real cool kind of level of popularity - and I was a little kid, you know ? Basically we had fun with each other and just tripped out.

Can you talk a bit about your frame of mind when you left the Chili Peppers back in 1992 ?

Well, when you live this lifestyle where you do whatever you want to do... I found, after we finished touring for Mother's Milk that what I loved spending my life doing was playing guitar all the time. I loved learning about different colors that you can put through your instrument by studying all kinds of guitar players and just digging, really closely the different ways that people use the instrument to get different kinds of sounds out of it. And I was having a really good time putting together different types of styles of guitar playing that I loved, and I started really developing my own style of guitar playing. I did nothing but that for the whole time we wrote and recorded BloodSugar. By the time we were done recording BloodSugar, it felt so good to be me. My head was just swirling all the time. I felt really free inside - like anything I played was gonna be a good feeling coming out. I felt that the type of style that I had come up with was something that could go a lot of different places. It seemed like no matter what I did - if I told myself, "Play shitty, play like you suck" - it would always sound good. Everything I did sounded good.

Then we had to go on tour, though, and I realized that going on tour was gonna fuck with me. It wasn't gonna do anything for this state that I had gotten my brain into - where I just felt really good all the time and was putting really good feelings into the air. And my head was telling me to quit the band, but I couldn't make a move that would create so many sad feelings among these guys whom I was very close to at the time. But once we started touring, we all drifted apart, and we weren't getting along anymore. Anthony and I hated each other - we wouldn't look at each other onstage, we wouldn't look at each other offstage, wouldn't talk to each other. Flea eventually was really mad at me for not wanting to work on my relationship with Anthony, not wanting to do anything about it, just leaving it how it was. I didn't care if we never spoke to each other; I didn't care if we never looked at each other because I didn't want to be friends with him. Flea started to resent me because of that, and maybe Anthony, too... I don't know.

What was the breaking point while the band was touring in 1992 ?

It just got to the point where it was just... I mean, I could sort of pretend to be nice about everything and say the occasional sentence to Anthony here and there if we were eating together or something. But it just wasn't gonna go anywhere. Everything that we had built up as a band from BloodSugar had gone downhill since then. I had lived this life of putting nothing into the air but good feelings, and then all these bad feelings had been generated, at which I was the center. And as a band onstage, we weren't listening to each other - we were so tight that we didn't have to listen to each other to sound good. But I was being real spontaneous every night, playing differently every night, only nobody was listening to me. The only people who noticed the vibes that I was grabbing onto every night were my guitar tech and some girlfriend in the audience.

It would've been impossible to try to make another album at that point. Bands do it, but that's when they begin to suck. That's when the music isn't as good, because you're not hearing people who are playing music because they love it and they love getting off on each other, they're just playing music because it's something that they make money doing and are successful at. I'm not into that, and I wasn't gonna go forward with that. I felt no excitement about the camaraderie of the band anymore. I didn't like the people in the band; we weren't making each other happy. When I quit the band - I had been thinking about it for about a year - it had gotten to the point where it had fucked with me enough to where I felt like I had nothing left inside. I just felt destroyed, because I had gotten myself to this really pure, beautiful place, and I had just let touring destroy it all. To be putting out all these beautiful things in the air with these people who you had originally developed this expression with, and have them just not care at all.

During the period when you were away from the band, you released a pair of solo albums : Niandra LaDes/Usually Just a T-shirt and Smile from the Streets You Hold. I particularly enjoyed the first one, but I must say, Smile scared the hell out of me.

Smile was recorded into my four-track at the same time as Niandra LaDes was recorded : while we were writing and recording BloodSugarSexMagik. At the same time that I developed the guitar style that I felt would be the perfect kind of guitar playing to play with Flea, I also developed my own style of writing music, writing lyrics, and playing guitar in a very "non-rock star-ish" way. Niandra LaDes and Usually Just a T-shirt were released [on the same disc] because they were solid, conceptual records; they're two complete sorts of feelings. Smile from the Streets You Hold was just leftover stuff that I had sitting around from the same period, with the exception of five songs : three songs that were recorded into a cassette player immediately before it was released - songs I really wish weren't on there - and the two songs where I'm screaming, which were recorded in 1994 or so. But the rest of them were just leftover songs.

The album was made only because I needed money for drugs. I kept going back and forth with money, based on getting my record royalties every six months - I would spend that on drugs, and then I would have no money. And, at one of the periods where I had no money, this guy offered me a certain amount to deliver him a solo record. That was the only reason why Smile was done, so it's scattered; it's all over the place. I have certain friends who love it anyway and tell me, "Don't try to get it back." Because sometimes I think that I want to just get rid of it - buy it back from the guy or something. But I don't really care. It is what it is. It's music I recorded. I mean, I'm proud of who I've been; I'm proud of who I've always been.

I understand you quit playing guitar completely for a while.

Yeah. What I had expressed on the guitar hadn't amounted to anything other than me just being severely depressed. So, when I decided to become a heroin addict, I felt good all the time. And I wanted to just devote my life to going inside myself and enjoying the feeling of not being responsible to do anything, other than doing things to make myself feel good - without any concern for how I appear to the outside world. I spent a few years being invisible and enjoying that, and I'm a much richer person now because of it. I wanted to expand my understanding of art and artists. I was looking up to certain painters for what they expressed and their way of expressing. And now I realize that I do the same thing with the guitar. I have a perspective on it that's fresh,

that I'm excited about. I'm so happy that, as a teenager, I put all the hours into practicing the guitar that I did, because I'm able to get any kind of color out of it that I want.

After so much time off from playing, was it hard for you to get your chops back ?

Yeah. The whole time we were writing this record, my fingers weren't as strong as they used to be. And now they are. They probably would've been, with the amount I was playing, but I wasn't focusing on the kind of guitar players who had really strong fingers. I was focusing on new wave guitarists and punk guitarists for the style that I wanted to do on this album. People like Matthew Ashman from BowWowWow (who also was on the Adam and the Ants album *Dirk Wears White Socks*), Ricky Wilson from the B-52s, Bernard Sumner from New Order and Joy Division, Robert Smith from the Cure, Ian MacKaye and Guy Picciotto from Fugazi, Greg Ginn from Black Flag, Pat Smear from the Germs, the guys in Echo and the Bunnymen, Johnny Ramone... people who developed guitar styles not from years of playing, but from years of loving music and then all of a sudden getting freed up by realizing there was no "technique" that was necessary to express something. People who weren't really technically great guitar players, but were great guitar players because they made up original styles that were their own. I've gone through so much inside the last few years that I wanted to approach the guitar - being in this band - from that standpoint. I just thought it would be interesting and fun if I made that the direction of my playing for this album, and that's what I did.

Is there a concept or anything behind the new album's title, Californication ?

It's just a word that Anthony came up with, and then wrote lyrics around - each line of the song being a different sort of perspective on the word. Anthony writes in a certain style. It's about California because that's where he lives, but it's about other places in the world, too. We all write the music together, but only one person writes the lyrics : Anthony.

What are some of the key differences between Californication and BloodSugarSexMagik - the last album you recorded with the Peppers ?

Well, I told you one : My fingers were much stronger when we did BloodSugar. That's the main difference, from my standpoint. I suppose also that with BloodSugar we went from touring for a couple of years for Mother's Milk, to just mellowing out and making a record. This album, we came out of doing nothing. But, as far as how we get along : The interaction between us and the way we were going about writing was, in a lot of ways, even more together this time because we knew how went about making BloodSugar. We just know how to write with each other better now.

How did some of the songs on Californication evolve ?

All different ways. We're a band that writes music together. Sometimes something starts as a jam between the guitar and the drums, and then Flea will walk in and start playing bass, and it'll eventually turn into a song. We would also record a bunch of things, and Anthony would sort of go through the tapes all the time. He'd play us tapes like a week or a month after we did them and go, "This groove is great. We should try to make a song around it." Because we just write tons of stuff, and if Anthony starts dancing around the room and stuff, we feel like it's good. It was hard to make the album as short as it is. We wrote like 30 songs.

What was it like working with Rick Rubin again ?

Fantastic. I love having him as our producer because he says very little to me, as for as the guitar playing goes. I just do what I do. He helps the arrangements of the songs. He comes to the rehearsals, and he's just a great person who knows whether or not things are good. We recorded this record at a regular studio [Studio Two at Ocean Way Recording in Los Angeles], but we did it on the same kind of board that we did BloodSugar on. We were just so excited about recording music; we recorded the basics in a week and a half or so.

In the tradition of BloodSugar, it sounds like most of the tracks on Californication were cut live.

Yeah. It's the interaction; it's the way we write songs. We each play a part that's separate - we don't have one guy just come in and write the song and tell the other guys what they should play. I mean, sometimes you write a guitar part and there's a drum beat that's in your mind that goes with it, and there's no separating them; you can't help it. Sometimes, the drummer you're playing with can sense what that beat is by hearing the guitar part; sometimes you have to tell them the drum beat. But, basically we have four separate parts in the band that all interweave together to make the song. And if one guy's not playing, then the other guys' groove is gonna fall into the wrong sockets. Everybody's gotta push and lay back in the right places to fit everybody's part in smoothly. Everybody's gotta listen to the other guy's part. It's not like the Beatles, where you have a guy write chord changes and the vocal, and then you can record things to follow that. There's not one of us following the other one. Any one part in the mind of the listener can be the main part, and the other parts are always helping it. But the other parts can be just as prominent, too, if you listen to them.

Has your guitar and amp setup changed at all from when you recorder BloodSugar ?

On this album, I used a real old '65 Marshall. I also used a 200-watt bass head that I used on BloodSugar - I use a bass head and a guitar head at the same time; that's how I play. I had a good sound for this album, but Louie [the band's right-hand man] doesn't want me to take the heads on tour because he thinks they'll break. As far as guitars, I used a '66 Jaguar on "Around the World," one of the guitar parts on "This Velvet Glove," and the odd guitar part here and there. I used a '56 Stratocaster for most of the basic tracks, and a '62 Stratocaster - the sunburst one - on some stuff. I also used this '55 Gretsch white Falcon - it's the kind of guitar that Matthew Ashman used in Bow Wow Wow and Malcolm Young used to use in AC/DC - for "Californication" and "Otherside." I have .012-gauge strings on it. I'd like to go more into that - developing a guitar style using thick strings like that. It's fun. I also had a '61 Gibson SG, and I used a Telecaster on some things too, like "Easily" and "Scar

Tissue." Vincent Gallo [filmmaker] helped me find a lot of those guitars that are old, collectors' kinds of pieces. He knows more about guitars than anybody who lives in Los Angeles.

I was surprised that there's no Frusciante trademark "backwards guitar solos" on this record.

Well, we had a song on it called "Phat Dance" that had a backwards guitar solo on it. It's not on the record, though. That song will come out, but the vocal is gonna be changed slightly. Anthony was real bummed about that. But I do plenty of backwards guitar on Niandra LaDes, if that's what people want to hear. I would've liked to have that solo that I did on "Phat Dance" be on this record, but I went into that so deeply on Niandra LaDes, I don't really feel like it's something I have to do.

You always seem to be able turn your backwards guitar solos into coherent sounding, melodic statements. Can you explain how you approach your "backwards" leads ?

When I'm playing backwards, along with the chord changes, I just follow the chord changes. Every chord change that I'm following, it doesn't matter if I stumble going into it because that's just gonna be the end of the chord when you hear it forward. Those notes that I finally found are gonna be the first ones you hear, so it's always gonna sound like it goes right along with the chord. You get a flow going, and you just play to where it sounds good and has a form backwards, and it'll have another kind of form when people hear it forward.

There's some nice slide playing on "Scar Tissue."

I just played the slide on a Telecaster into my Fender Showman amp. My favorite slide guitarist is Snake Finger. His influence isn't evident on that song; but that's how I practice slide : from playing along with him and Jimmy Page. "Soul to Squeeze" [Chili Peppers' single from the Coneheads soundtrack, recorded during the BloodSugar sessions] has slide, too. That was a Gibson lap-steel, and I wasn't playing it with a slide, I was using a spice jar.

When you're playing slide in that style, are you playing in standard tuning ?

Yes. I'm doing it in standard tuning because I'm just doing single notes. If you're trying to learn Robert Johnson songs and stuff where it's a lot of chords, you need a different tuning. But when you're just soloing, I don't see the reason for changing the tuning. It doesn't really matter how it's tuned. I remember when we recorded "Soul to Squeeze," I didn't know how it was tuned [laughs]. It was just however the lapsteel was tuned at the time. It didn't really matter 'cause I was just playing single notes; you're never gonna hear the relationship between one string and the other.

You and Flea are engaged in some pretty intense counterpoint in "Parallel Universe." How did that come together ?

Flea was just playing this bass line - I forget how it happened, we were just jamming - and I guess he was practicing playing with a pick, and I figured I'd mute the strings like Ian MacKaye does in Fugazi. Then I figured it'd be cool if I played a harmony to what Flea was doing. I remember I just started ending it differently : I had the minor 3rd in it, then I had the 4th, and then, when I did the major 3rd, it inspired Flea to do that descending part to resolve it. It was just playing off of each other and just thinking it would be cool to do a harmony with him, with the rhythm and texture like that. It was an important thing to us to make every section have a new texture, like the way electronic music is - where you have each section be all different shapes and different textures. We do that on this album with our instruments.

You just described some of the parts you played using music theory terms. Did you pick up some of that stuff during your brief stint at the Guitar Institute Technology before you joined the Peppers in 1988 ?

No. I was enrolled there because my dad was paying my rent because of it, but I didn't go to the classes, and I didn't learn anything. I got in there already knowing all the stuff that you'd learn in the year that you would go there. I was just doing cocaine all the time : punching in and going back to my friend's house and doing cocaine and going back to school to punch out so that my dad would think I was there. They didn't take roll in the classes, so I would just go to punch in. I already knew music theory. I think of music that way but only insofar as it relates to the color of what I'm doing. I don't think of "theory" and "color" as being two separate things. They fought with each other at various points in the development of my musicianship. They don't anymore. Like, when I was focusing on new wave and punk guitar players for this album, I looked at what they were doing in a technical way. I thought of the theory behind the colors that they were doing - why they chose the notes that they chose - using music theory. I was fascinated by it. I have a theoretical perspective on it that makes it really interesting. Now, ever since we finished the record, I've been focusing on the "guitar hero" - type people and [sax players like] Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and Eric Dolphy. I can play all those things on the guitar. That's how my fingers have gotten really strong since we finished the record : I've been focusing on the hardest music that I can play.

I've noticed in your past interviews you stress the importance of letting go of the technical side of playing.

I think it's important for me to see music as the colors that I'm getting out of the instrument and not the physical aspect of it. It was a big revelation for me when I saw music clearly that way, which happened after we had finished touring for Mother's Milk. All of a sudden, I started seeing music in a different way than I'd ever seen it. But since then, I've seen how there's a way that you can totally focus on the physical aspect of it to the point where the spiritual part of it and the technical part just work together with each other. These definitions of theory came from analyzing something that came from a spiritual place. You can play in a way where you're focusing on the physical part of it and still have it be totally just an expression of who you are. I don't think that it's the purpose of music to drive you into "displaying" anything; I don't think it's music when

somebody's "displaying" their talents. But at the same time, there are people who have focused on the technical aspects of what they do - trying to do something that's technically different from everything else - and it comes out being a real powerful display of a wide range of colors. Some people nowadays think that it's not cool to really dedicate yourself to music the way that people in the early '70s - like Genesis, King Crimson, and Yes - dedicated themselves to their craft and then made music that was very complex. I think what those groups did is beautiful. I think it's cool to dedicate yourself to something, and I think being a good musician is a really important thing. I don't think there's anything "uncool" about it. Some people just have a fucked-up perception of it because, at some point, I guess in the '80s, people started to equate being a showoff with being a good musician. Steve Hackett's playing in Genesis, he's totally as for from being a showoff as you could be. He was a good musician; he just had a big palette of colors to draw from. So I think that learning technical things can limit people if their perspective on music is already limited in that way. Music is just a beautiful thing.

Who were some of your first guitar heroes ?

When I was a real little kid - about seven or eight - I liked Jimmy Page. And I had the second Van Halen record, which I liked a lot, and I liked Joe Perry. But when I heard those guitarists, I didn't understand how I could make those sounds out of a guitar. I knew I wanted to be a guitarist from as far back as I can remember, but I didn't see how I could do it. I just knew in my head that I was gonna do it at one point. But when I was nine, I found out about punk - when I heard the Germs - and it started to make sense to me : That I would be able to play those songs. From the standpoint of being nine years old, the idea that I could play as good as Pat Smear one day was real and magical and incredible to me, but at the same time it seemed possible. So it was people like Greg Ginn, Pat Smear, Steve Jones, Joe Strummer, and Mick Jones who inspired me, at first, to start playing. Those were the songs that I learned, songs by those people. I got into Devo, the B-52s, and the Germs when I was like nine, and then when I was 10, I pulled this guitar out of the closet and started playing. And then, once I convinced my dad to buy me a Stratocaster, I started with the people who I think anybody who starts playing guitar should learn from : Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, and Jimi Hendrix. To me, in terms of rock guitar, that's as far as playing has ever gone, in some ways. To me, it's what started the vocabulary of what a "rock star" sounds like when they play a guitar solo [laughs], what a "rock guitar solo" is, what the approach is. It set the standard.

Are you looking forward to performing at Woodstock this summer ?

I'm looking forward to all our shows; I'm looking forward to every show we're gonna play. I'm not looking forward to Woodstock any more than I am the Hollywood Palladium. I'm just looking forward to playing. I'm looking forward to us getting along and getting off on each other's performance the way that we've always gotten off writing music with each other. I hope we're constantly growing together as we're on tour in the same way that we grew while we were making BloodSugar and while we were making this record. With my guitar playing, I'm just trying to get better all the time.

Did you ever imagine for a second that you'd find yourself back in the Chili Peppers again ?

No. It's the best thing in the world to have nothing but your creativity to think about every day. When you're making music with people who care about your creativity and who are responsive to it the way Anthony, Flea, and Chad are responsive to mine, it's just the best feeling in the world. It's such a good thing to play onstage with people when you're all looking at each other and you're all listening to each other. When you're a band that has chemistry and you do that, it's such a powerful thing. It's so fun when you have four people with four distinct styles that, when you play together, it creates this thing bigger than the sum of the individuals. I'm so proud to be in a group like that. And we all know that we all appreciate each other now. When I quit the band, we didn't appreciate each other at all - all the way around. I didn't appreciate them, and they didn't appreciate me. And now we all appreciate each other a great deal. We have a lot of fun playing music with each other. It's been so fun for the last year to have that to do every day.