

JOHN FRUSICANTE

He underplays. He's in love with the unusual. He fights against the rest of the Chili Peppers when they want him to play a solo. With the release of his new solo album, welcome to the world of John Frusciante, the world's most unlikely guitar-hero...

John Frusciante-the resurrected guitarist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and creator of a handful of esoteric solo albums-might best be categorised as a minimalist player, an anti-guitar figure eschewing lengthy solos, the application of finger vibrato, and the use of a tremolo bar, even though his main instrument is a 1962 Fender Strat.

His new solo album, *Shadows Collide With People*, is self-produced and features John playing guitar, keyboards, bass, percussion, and singing-a veritable one-man band.

On a picture perfect California afternoon, John talks about his unique approach to playing and writing. Having endured seven kinds of physical and mental hell with past addictions and depression, the Peppers player is a content and subdued as a baby with a bottle. So we get John Frusciante to make sense of John Frusciante...

What's the appeal of recording solo albums separate from the Red Hot Chili Peppers? "I don't write lyrics in the Chilis and essentially I'm a songwriter. What I do in the band has more to do with putting pieces together, I might write whole song, but it's still just a guitar part. I consider myself as a songwriter, I've been writing lyrics since I was 11 years old, and I've been getting better and better."

Describe the writing process for a song like the album's opener, Carvel.

"First off, we made a demo recording of the song-something we did for most of tunes on the album-and did most of the experimenting there. I put together the demo for Carvel pretty much by myself.

Although Josh [Klinghoffer, longtime musical associate] overdubbed the drums, I recorded the guitar, played a synth bass, and I also took my Mellotron sounds, which I had samples of on an Emulator, and tried to use tones I don't normally use. I wanted to have a different sound for every section. Then Josh and I always make up our [vocal] harmonies once something is in demo form. And that's probably the final stage.

"With the Chilis it's different. When it comes to my stuff, I usually go with the first take. Actually, the first time the band decides to make a solo section in a song I'm really against it. But I go through phases, 'cos when I'm on tour I want all the solos to be longer, I'll go up there and solo for 10 minutes."

Can you describe your approach to rhythm playing, the way you strum? "My style just comes from playing for years. I mean, I can recognise the playing styles of most of my favourite guitarists. There's something that makes no two people's muscles, skin and electricity the same. You can hear someone like Jeff Beck playing just one note and you know immediately it's him. "As I've grown as a musician, I've become more comfortable with my own style. I think a lot of guitar players cover their sound up, while I've grown more accustomed to the idea of having my sound in a kind of naked state."

Physically, how do you approach the rhythmic aspect of your style? Is it a forceful strumming, is it reckless? "I definitely do both. I play as hard as I can a lot of the time. But in the last few years, I've grown more interested in techniques that can be performed with gentle playing, certain harmonics and things that only come from playing gently. This means when do you play hard, it really means something."

In a sense, you bring an acoustic rhythm approach to you electric playing . Would you agree? " I guess so. I play both mediums a lot but what you're talking about is how I strum really hard. It's hard to say if one influences the other, because I don't give it a lot of thought. As far as the strength

of my right wrist goes, that comes from punk, from solely playing downstrokes. Punk is what I started playing, and that's where all my power comes from.

"The delicacy and finesse in my right wrist comes from having played so much funk with Flea. We spent hours playing funk grooves together. I probably express myself more through rhythm guitar, but at same time it's not something I'm conscious of."

Would you describe yourself as a soloist in the traditional sense? "When it comes to soloing, I'm more interested in doing things texturally with the guitar, trying to come up with ways of

playing I find interesting. And for me the rock star guitar soloing approach is a dead end. I can't see many people taking it anywhere different. And for me, the most interesting guitar players we've had over the last 20 years haven't been soloists. They've been people like Bernard Sumner from Joy Division and New Order, Johnny Marr from The Smiths, Radiohead's Johnny Greenwood, Kurt Cobain. These people all did interesting things with their sound and lead guitar parts, but it's not flashy.

"Flashy guitar playing reached a peak with Jimmy Page and I don't think anybody's taken it any further since, although Eddie Van Halen took it to an interesting place. I'd love it if a guitarist came along and did some kind of flashy lead guitar that interested me, instead, I'm more excited by people who work with sound and know the ways in which an electric guitar can be turned into many different instruments. If you just limit yourself to the electric guitar from the blues-lead guitar

standpoint, it's just a few instruments. But if you look at what Keith Levine did with Public Image on their first couple of albums, it's a different instrument for every song. Electric guitar can be so many things.

"Sometimes when I play live with the Chili Peppers I get into that flashy rock star lead guitar thing, but that's because I'm feeding off the energy of the audience. It's not something I'm interested in musically. Musically, I think lead guitar playing should make a textural sonic statement within the song, or it should be as beautiful and melodic as something you'd sing."

A key factor of your soloing is the melodic aspect. Where do those choices of notes come from? "I usually try to create some sort of interesting juxtaposition between what Flea's playing and what I'm doing- I work in the space that's created between us. I think more about shaping the space between the guitar and bass rather than, 'What can I do Over this?' The theoretical things I think of have more to do with creating space."

Does a song like Dosed, from the Chili Peppers' last album, represent this light and dark aspect? "I actually came up with that sound when the rest of the band was outside taking a break during rehearsal. I was in the studio playing around with that Line 6 green loop pedal and made a loop of one guitar part, then added another and another. I had those three guitar lines playing, and I was jamming over that. By the time everybody else came in, I had this beautiful loop going and that's what the song is. On the record, I played each part on its own, so we could spread it out in stereo."

On the new solo record, are you thinking in those same terms, rhythmically and solo-wise? "With my stuff I'm not so much thinking about the space between me and somebody else, I'm thinking how I can embellish the song. Something like the solo at the end of Omission was really just about the idea of having this grand ending, then having a solo with a small Tom Verlaine-type tone. That's probably a [Fender] Jaguar."

How would you describe the rhythm track Cabron? "That song's inspired by Martin Barre's guitar playing in Jethro Tull on Aqualung. I learned all the songs on that album, because he uses the capo on every tune. I just started to write something like that. The fact it ended up sounding Mexican has more to do with Anthony's vocal and Chad's drums than it does my guitar part. If you just analyse the guitar, it's coming more from a prog rock standpoint-it's a real flashy, busy guitar line."

In a sense, would you say you balance Anthony's melodie, rhythmic vocals with your guitar parts in a type of call-and-answer routine? "No, the parts really don't work like that- Anthony's vocal answers my guitar. The guitar always comes before the vocals in the Chili Peppers, so when you hear them both doing the same thing it's usually because he's singing along to me. For instance, on Don't Forget Me I wanted the verse to switch between a machine-like sound to a flowing tone, so I alternate between left-hand trills to the machine-like thing.

" That song is a great example of Flea playing the same bassline over and over for like half an hour while I play different guitar parts alongside. And those were probably just the first ones that came into my head. Then Flea stepped on his fuzz, I stomped on my wah that was turned to the treblest position, and the chorus basically came from that.

" Actually, you should listen to a live version of that song to truly hear how I wanted it to sound, because on the record Rick [Rubin, producer] made the harmonies much louder and turned the guitar down in the chorus. Thing is, the idea was to have that song's chorus sounding like a really overdriven, heavy over-the-edge kinda thing. Hear it on the B side to one of this album's singles."

Does producer Rick hear your guitar with the same ears as you? " I produce my own guitars

with the Chilis, Rick doesn't have anything to do with them. Rick does more with the drums, vocals and mixing : he leaves my guitar and Flea's bass alone. He might occasionally suggest things, like he said, 'On Warm Tape you should do an answer thing like George Harrison does with a 12-string guitar on some Beatles song.' That idea worked perfectly with what I was thinking, because I'd already done an overdub, so it ended up being a slide guitar being answered by a 12-string guitar. So he'll throw little suggestions my way, but he won't tell me if he thinks a guitar part isn't working."

Can you describe what you're doing in the verse, that repeated figure?

"The sound you're talking about is an echo set on triplets for the whole song. Actually, the person I was thinking of when I came up with that was Daniel Ash, his Bauhaus song called Double Dare [from In The Flat Field]."

Are any of the songs on your album that may have worked with the Chilis?"I think Cut-Out has a chord or two in common with I Could Die For You on the Chilis album. Sometimes the ideas cross over, but in general it's very clear where I should use stuff. And I'm never unclear about what sounds good or what's not. I'm always sure of myself.

"For the Chilis, when I come up with a guitar part and don't know where to take it, I try to write something interesting. Whereas with my songs, I might not find the guitar parts interesting. I'll concentrate more on the vocals and synthesizers."

Shadows Collide...is peppered with keyboards. Does it bring out different elements of your playing?"The use of keyboard effects was all part of my idea for this record- I wanted it to have a wide variety of different sounds. When we made the demos, that was the fun part, finding interesting sounds to colour the songs."

And virtually every song has an acoustic guitar at the heart of it."I write the songs on acoustic guitar, and again that was part of my concept for the record. In the song Omission, when it gets really fast towards the end, it would have made sense to use an electric guitar. But the idea was to leave out the electric and have the acoustic strumming really hard and fast. I didn't want to overstate things with an electric that could be simply said with an acoustic guitar."

What inspires you to write?"My songs are all written in the moment. If I get an idea for a song, I'll sit there until it's finished... whether it takes five minutes or three hours. I always finish it or I never finish it. I can understand why you'd think my songs were put together in pieces - that's the process I use for the Chili Peppers. But for my songs, I conceive them in that one moment."

If we were writing the primer on how to achieve the John Frusciante guitar tone, how would you describe it?"Hitting the guitar really hard. Using orange Tortex picks [Jim Dunlop]. And I use gauge 0.010 strings, or if I'm playing the [Gretsch] White Falcon, 0.012s."

What is it you like about the Strat?"I just didn't have a Les Paul! Although I got one recently- a 1969 and I love it, but I wish I had a '59. Now the main guitars I use are a Telecaster and the Les Paul. Between these two you can get practically any kind of sound.

"I think the way I sound has a lot to do with the tele. And even though I don't use Marshalls now and play through Vox amps, it still sounds like me. Another thing is if I'm playing a two- or three-note chord, I still hit all the strings. I just block the ones I'm not using with my left hand. This technique has a lot to do with the Frusciante sound, because most people play a two-note chord in the middle of the guitar, being careful not to hit the other strings. For me, it's more a percussive thing, which comes naturally. I've only noticed it when I've shown people my technique and I realise what I'm doing."

What about finger vibrato? You don't use it much."That's a conscious decision- I feel some people use it too much. It's like Jimi Hendrix used it to its full effect, and no-one is going to better that. I guess during the time of Blood Sugar Sex Magik I was more into using that kind of vibrato, but in the last five years, the guitarists who've inspired me probably don't have the technical ability to do something like that. For example, I don't think someone like Matthew Ashman [Bow Wow Wow] has enough finger strength, but that's the kind of playing I find interesting, so I end up talking on those people's limitations. But it's exactly these limitations people work within and the creativity that comes from working through them that I find interesting. Sometimes a guitarist's limitations aren't because they can't do it, but because they choose not to- that's interesting.

"In the solo from the Chili's Minor Thing I'm playing vibrato and it's pretty smooth; it just went with that distorted sound. I pull out the technique once in a while, but I don't want to depend on it.

By not using it, I've found more colourful ways of arranging notes. The notes and rhythm have to be stronger and speak for themselves."

Even the use of your tremolo bar on the Strat is limited."Nowadays, that's how it is, but if you met me when I was 17 you wouldn't say that. Yeah, I mostly use the bar when playing live for feedback. That's where I enjoy using it. But it's another of those situations where it's been used so much, I want to do something new."

In Shadows Collide... a perfect reflection of you as a guitarist?"Yeah, it's exactly what I set out to create. The earlier records are all demos, this was more like I had a certain collection of songs. I was collaborating with Josh and we knew we wanted to make a record. The idea for it was very clear; an album with a lot of harmonies and keyboard parts, with songs that had interesting chords rather than flashy guitar and bass playing. Guitars isn't what we were doing on this record, although one day I'm sure we will.