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BY CARY DARLING

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When George Clinton (Godfather of Parliament and Funkadelic) named his new album *Some Of My Best Jokes Are Friends*, he must have been referring to his latest production project. The Red Hot Chili Peppers began as a mere crazed glimmer in the eyes of Anthony Kiedis, Hillel Slovak and Flea, who were intent on taking advantage of a friend's offer to go onstage and act outrageous for fifteen minutes. Now, following a debut album sacrificed to the ill-fated EMI/Enigma collaboration, the Peppers and EMI proper are unleashing a new album, fortified by funkmeister Clinton.

Best characterized as white dopes on funk, the Peppers combine



technically adept (if somewhat contorted) instrumental prowess, wildman vocals and a demented attitude that would embarrass even the most twisted juvenile delinquent. But not BAM's Cary Darling, who with reportorial bravery spent the better part of an afternoon attempting to interject questions between bassist Flea's immodest ravings. For the truth about LA's strangest combo and a complete rundown of the names the Peppers and initial producer Andy Gill (ex-Gang Of Four) called each other in the studio, check this issue's cover story. — BF

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THE
RED
HOT
CHILI
PEPPERS
GET
FUNKADELICIZED

BORN TO BE WIRED

BY
CARY
DARLING

Check it out. Here's Michael Balzary, preferably known as Michael B., The Flea, Flea Van Cleef, Flea Ving or simply Flea for those who can't master more than one syllable at a time, sitting in a plant-shrouded record company office. His hair is dyed a bright enough red to send bulls charging, and it's pulled into dozens of little pigtails, the likes of which were last seen in wavering black and white on *Little Rascals* re-runs. This, coupled with an occasional gap-toothed grin, gives him a decidedly *outré* appearance, though his stare can be dead-on serious. Like, don't even think of bothering me with the trivials, Jack.

And he's talking. And talking. See, Flea dominates just about any conversation in which he happens to take part. Drummer Cliff Martinez sits across the room but is absolutely mute. Strat-master guitarist Hillel Slovak (a.k.a. Slim Billy or Long Daddy Slow) contributes, and lead singer Anthony Kiedis is good for a couple of laughs. But the floor belongs to Flea, one of the few people on God's green Earth who could give David Lee Roth competition in the boast-til-you-bust department. In a burst of humility, he is prone to saying things like, "It goes without saying that we're the wildest, craziest motherfuckers who ever walked onto a stage."

Right now, there is enough activity in the Peppers camp to give his words some ring of truth. The Red Hot Chili Peppers, the band whose hardcore-punk-meets-get-down-funk approach presaged the current infatuation with Run-D.M.C. and the like, are fresh from Dee-troit, where their second EMI album *Freaky Styley* (originally titled *Butt Seriously*) was produced by

none other than the Funk Overlord himself, George Clinton. There's talk of a tour with Clinton, and Kiedis is treading into Time Zone territory by recording a duet with Zulu Nation honcho Afrika Bambaataa. That would be a mighty high compliment for any band, but for a bunch of white guys from the Fairfax area of LA — by way of Australia, Israel, Michigan, and Ohio — this verges on the miraculous. No wonder Flea is stoked.

"Detroit's an ugly fuckin' city," he laughs. "One night we were walking down the street and this car full of guys pulls up next to us. And they go, 'You guys are white, man! You guys are white!' They're pointing at us and we said, 'Yeah, we're white, look —.'" With that, Flea pulls his shirt up, revealing his pale underside. "We were hanging out with the coolest cats in the city. Basically, Detroit for us was home, studio, home — and the usual wild recreation that rock bands do!"

Yeah, wild recreation; that about sums up the Pepper way of life. Their music is a nuclear fusion of styles and humor — all revved up and cranked

to 10 — while their stage shows are raucous, often ending with everyone naked (with socks covering the vitals, and we don't mean the feet). Such behavior made them a must-see item on the LA scene but got them banned in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which just happens to be Kiedis' hometown. "There was a big article about hometown boy makes good; goes to Hollywood and gets a record contract," recalls Flea. "We played and then afterwards there's this big article where people had complained."

In mock outrage, Slovak adds, "I brought my daughter to come and see you!"

Flea continues, "They said, 'If it was my son, I'd shoot him.' That was great. It was a really fun show. When we played in Ann Arbor, it was billed as 'the band that was banned in Grand Rapids!'"

And the onslaught on Michigan didn't stop there. While on one of their artistic guerilla attacks around Detroit, they simply commandeered a nightclub. "We just laid low while this band was playing; they went

"When we made the first record," recalls Flea, "we were a very unsterile kind of band. We were like the wildest live band around. And we still are."



PHOTO: ED CONNER

offstage and before they came back for their encore, we ran onstage and grabbed their stuff and started playing." Flea's smile is wide. "They were too scared to stop us."

But what brought them to Detroit was less a desire to intimidate the locals than to shore up their reputation as one of LA's most popular bands after a self-titled debut album that a) they weren't all that happy with because they fought like dogs with producer/ex-Gang Of Four auteur Andy Gill and b) it didn't give Michael Jackson any sleepless nights in the sales department. Also, that first album featured guitarist Jack Sherman, whom they now say had a different, more studied philosophy which didn't jell with everyone else's ad-hoc musical anarchy. But more than anything, it was the experience with Gill which almost forced them to give up the funk — literally.

"It was a nightmare," recalls Flea of the sessions. "No one was happy with anything, and it was a constant argument over every little thing. It got to the point where it got so emotional that it got way beyond just not liking what was going on sound-wise. Andy was calling us names and we were calling him names. We called him an old idiot and an old, jaded fool. He called us stupid and said we didn't know what we were doing. Everything just got completely blown out of proportion."

"At the time, right when we made that record we were a very unsterile kind of band. We were like the wildest live band around and still are. I wanted to capture that. I wasn't anti-slickness, anti-technology, anti-getting good quality and clean sounds on tape. But Andy was trying to make us into a pop act, the Thompson Twins or something like that. So instead of going all the way in that direction, or all the way in the wild direction, it fell somewhere in the middle, which is worse than either of them."

But The Peppers had no one to blame for their plight but themselves. They had chosen Gill because they liked the spare angular Anglo-funk of earlier Gang Of Four. But, to their detriment, they hadn't listened to any recent Gang Of Four records, because I didn't like them," says Flea. "I decided not to even pay any attention to them. He didn't like his original records, which was scary. He said, 'Oh yeah, a few lunatics bought them, who cares?'"

The choice of Clinton was inspired not as much by record company politics, even though both acts record for the Capitol/EMI family, but by Clinton's own loose-limbed style which The Peppers figured would fit right in with what they're doing. That Clinton rarely produces acts outside of his Parliament-Funkadelic *thang* didn't matter to them. "Before we started up this band, we hadn't listened to very much Parliament or Clinton," admits Kiedis. "Then after we started, people started saying, 'Hey, have you ever listened to much Clinton? Because you guys sound like you're influenced by him.' We said, 'Not really,' and we checked him out. We bought all his records, listened to them all, and really liked them all. So it was just a natural solution to call him up on the telephone and ask him if he would produce us. That's exactly what we did."

And Clinton didn't take much convincing. "Michael went out to visit him for a weekend, brought him a tape of ours and sort of explained the whole concept to him. And he went for it."

"The first thing he said was that funk comes in all colors. That's what he said," states Flea matter-of-factly. "Musically, he made minor changes but he really didn't screw around with the arrangements at all. First, we went up to his farm, which is way out in the boondocks. We stayed

there and hung out in his house, which has like a million stuffed animals and no furniture. We stayed for two weeks, up at the farm, practicing in his living room. He would just sit down and talk about how groovy everything is. We made a little demo tape, and he helped Anthony's vocals a lot."

Certainly, the first thing to jump out on *Freaky Styley* is that Kiedis now sings as opposed to keeping it in his rantin' and chantin' style of the debut album. "At first, I got there and everybody was saying, 'Well, George is going to help you over this big hump of singing.' For the first couple of weeks, I was kind of nervous because everybody had all these expectations," recalls Kiedis, behind a curtain of straight, honey-blond hair. "Once I forgot about that, it started flowing. When we went into the vocal sessions, all the basic tracks were finished and it was just he and I in the studio. We really worked together. I had a very easy time mimicking things he would say to me, and I could copy him pretty well."

Flea sums up George's vocal coaching style more succinctly. "George said 'Sing, motherfucker, sing!'"

Clinton got so inspired that he would sometimes come from behind the board to harmonize and dance. "He would be out there with headphones, standing right next to me. He'd be dancing up and down, boxing with me and stuff, giving me his vibe," says Kiedis, who raises up his tennis shoe which has a long purple-red, braided strand hanging from the heel. "Here's a lock of his dread on my shoe here. He got a haircut while we were there and we all got some of his hair."

The others are equally enamored of George; they have similar dreads sprouting from their instruments. "Musically, he let us run free," adds Flea. "He didn't screw around with any of the vocal concepts, but he really helped vocal and musical ar-

rangements. The basic concept was to go out there and play your asses off and get it right. While we were playing, he had a microphone hooked to our headphones so he could talk to us while we were jamming. You'd be playing and he'd say, 'Bring it down, bring it down' or 'Okay, really push it' and stuff like that. Sometimes, instead of a click track, we'd have a human click track. There'd be a bunch of guys in the control room just clapping on two and four. A lot of the stuff was really first take live, and it has that excitement on it."

If there are two words — one concept — which sets off a bonfire in the Pepper camp, it's computer technology. This immediately put them at odds with Andy Gill. "Even Andy told me that on the first two (Gang Of Four) records, they didn't use click tracks. They played it live. To me that means a lot; getting the real human feeling of a band. I don't know, to me, computers and music are a very sick thing."

Never mind that most modern funk is quite dependent on the new technology or that many rap songs deftly lifted their big bam boom from Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express* and *Computer World*. "Oh yeah, I know that," concedes Flea. "I don't like it. There is a lot of funky stuff being done like that. I think it can be done with the best and biggest sounds, without any computers. I can't take anything away from funk bands doing funky things but..."

"It's just a different thing," Slovak interjects.

"I think what we're doing is a much higher form of expression and we're showing more of ourselves. Just the fact we're not using those computers, it's got a lot more soul, a lot more humanness."

"It's just a different form of expression," retorts Slovak. "I think the reason why it's so threatening is because that stuff is getting on the radio as opposed to true funk, non-synthesized funk."

"Sure you program a drum machine but the meter is...you're grooving to a metal box, man!" adds Flea, his voice full of disgust. "I don't want to groove to a metal box. I want to groove to someone pounding on the skins. Give me the skins!"

If Run-D.M.C. are the kings of rock as they proclaim, Flea for one is not one of their subjects, even though both bands are working a similar rock-funk terrain. "I think they're positive, but I thought the show bored me to death," he says. "At the turntable, it was so ridiculous, I can't even believe it. The curtain opens up, and there's a turntable with a spotlight on it. It spins, and everyone watches it."

"But that's not ridiculous to me," Slovak again interjects. "It's just a different act, you know."

"It's a different act," Flea admits, "but I don't think it deserves..."

"You don't have to go!" says Slovak. "I think they should do more than that."

"It deserves to be acknowledged." "People deserve more than that."

Flea and Slovak may quibble over just what is The Funk, but it is obvious in rehearsal that they, and the other two band members, have a musical camaraderie that cannot be denied. On "Out In LA," a track from

the first album, there's Flea bobbing his head like a jackhammer and nailing that beat down. Martinez keeps it steady on some very real skins (no Simmons in sight), while Slovak's wiry guitar cuts through it all with a dastardly funky grace. On top of it all is Kiedis, standing like some surfer warrior and blowing like a mean Santa Ana: "We're all a bunch of brothers livin' in a cool way/Along with six million others livin' in a cool way."

The Peppers are enjoying themselves, which may explain why they've downplayed individual careers to be in this "bunch of brothers." Kiedis is an actor who, the next day, was set to audition for a new Lorimar pilot, *Bridges To Cross*, and has been on the box before in NBC's *Brave New World*, Coca-Cola commercials, an *ABC After School Special* and (on the big screen) in *FIST*, starring Sylvester Stallone.

Flea left an early incarnation of What Is This? to play with Fear. Last year, he was asked to join Public Image, but he turned down Mr. Rotten. Slovak, an original Pepper, left to play with the version of What Is This? that appeared on their debut MCA album last year. He was replaced in the Peppers by Jack Sherman, who was in turn replaced by his predecessor, Slovak. Confused? Stands to reason, as nobody — including The Peppers themselves — meant for the band to be a full-time gig. In 1983, Flea, Slovak, and Kiedis — all friends from Fairfax High School — happened to be sharing an apartment. "A friend had a show at the Grandia Ballroom and he just wanted us to come dick off onstage," remembers Flea. "We'd never rehearsed. We just kind of hummed the songs to each other. We hummed a tune and said, 'Yeah, we'll do that,' and we went on and went over great. We had a minute and a half, and we just rocked the place down. It was just going to be a one time thing, as

a joke. He (Slovak) was in What Is This? I was in Fear, we all had our serious bands. Then someone else asked us to play because they saw us that night, and all of a sudden we were the hottest band in Hollywood. I said, 'Fuck Fear,' because I wasn't getting along too well with them anyway."

Earlier, they had all played in Anthem — the very mention of which makes them howl like a demented Rick James (Yowww!). Even though the name wasn't misspelled and didn't have umlauts, Anthem was a heavy metal band. "With Slovakian influences," Flea clarifies. "It was like the Peppers now. It was like an eight-year-old kid getting his first drum set and going YOOHOOHOOYOOHOOHOO! It was a rock-til-you-drop concept."

Kiedis, not being able to play an instrument, used what he had: his mouth. "I was the official announcer. I used to introduce them wherever they played. I had introductions like 'Cal Worthington calls 'em the hottest rockers in LA, their fathers call 'em crazy, and the girls call 'em all the time, but I call 'em like I see 'em, and I call them Anthem.'"

Funk was the great leveller for these guys from all over the globe — Flea, a third or fourth generation Aboriginal somewhere on his father's side, was born in Australia; Slovak's from Israel; Martinez and Kiedis are from the Midwest. "Even in Anthem, there was always a leaning towards blues and the funkier side of rock or funk," states Slovak. "Stuff like the Ohio Players. I've always been drawn to the beat."

"Defunkt for me was the big one. I was really into Defunkt and the Ohio Players."

"And Aerosmith."

"I was brought up on jazz."

"And Zeppelin."

"If that's not funk, what is funk?"

All these influences coagulated when clubs like The Radio, a rap/funk

joint, opened in downtown LA. "Funk was like the thing in Los Angeles," says Slovak. "It came on like a wave. It was really new and interesting."

"Among a certain crowd," Flea explains. "Among the Rhythm Lounge type of crowd."

"But that chic, in-crowd brings in the new trendy stuff and then everybody follows. But it was our crowd."

"It was mainly among our circle of friends. That's what did it. Like Hillel, me, and Anthony were all living together and a few other peripheral people. We were all pretty close knit and we were all pretty much into it. I never really identified too closely with any particular scene: a punk scene, a funk scene or this or that scene. I just had my friends who enjoyed the same things I enjoyed."

"But everybody was talking about spraypainting subways. It can't help but filter in."

"Yeah, but stuff that had just as big an influence was Miles Davis. I mean, for all of us, I'm sure, it's *On The Corner* and *Bitches Brew*."

"In LA, everyone was getting off on New York. If you were really from New York, you were really hip. I went to London right at the time when that stuff was really happening, they were so into New York. They were like 'LA's all right but not as good as New York.'"

Maybe, but what LA does have is an increasingly active and racially integrated pop/funk scene which, if one stretches the definition of funk quite liberally, could include such bands as The Untouchables, Fishbone, Chain Reaction, and St. Regis (now named Parts). Flea doesn't really comment on these other bands except to say, "Those guys are hanging with the crazy."

While the Chili Peppers have one foot firmly planted in the funk, the other foot stands on the ground of the radical Southern California rock served up by the likes of The Vandals.

Unlike some of these other bands, the Chili Peppers have not become junior Rambos, lobbing right-wing grenades at the punk left. In fact, "Green Heaven" from the first album and such new tracks as "Battleship," "Millionaires Against Hunger," and "American Ghost Dance" put the Peppers squarely to the left of some of their wild-eyed but conservative contemporaries. "Most of these guys are mainly concerned with having a good time and it's a gig," offers Flea, explaining why some punk bands are doing shows for Republican causes.

But Flea makes no big deal about the Peppers' own brand of politics, and he doesn't like to dwell on the fact that they are a white band playing funk music. "It's a good thing that we're white and playing funk and that's a statement. That's a fringe benefit," he explains. "We're playing what we dig. Colors, fuck colors, who cares? But it's good that people look at that and they see that; that's hip. But when we did this, we didn't think, 'Oh, let's get white guys playing black music.' That wasn't the concept; we were just partying. But it's great it happened like that because we all know how wicked the racism problem is."

And don't mention British bands. "They're getting so sterile. They have such far extremes like the docile, electronic bands and then the punk rock which is the most rude, crude, disgusting stuff; a complete reaction. They react so hard they forget about writing good songs," exclaims Flea, who can't wait to play in Europe so that he can "blaze a nasty, stinky, smelly trail" all across the Continent.

But, in a live setting, the Peppers too can also be pretty rude, crude, and disgusting. "Live, it's all about letting the booty juices flow," defends Flea. "Things happen and Jack used to get really bummed if he would get unplugged."

That, in a nutshell, was what drove Jack Sherman from the band. "On the first night of our tour, Jack quit before we even started. It was in Detroit. He quit because he told Anthony not to bump into him and Anthony laughed at him."

Flea explains that Sherman was more of a studio guitarist. "That's not the kind of band we are. We're kind of a raucous organization. But Jack rocked with us. He was good with us for a year."

All the time, Slovak had been itching to get back into the Peppers. "It got past being a nostalgic thing. Even after I left them initially, I'd go and see them and say, 'Wow!' It just got to a point where I wanted to get back into that candy jar," says Slovak.

If there is any consolation this time around for the Peppers, it's that the new album can do no worse than the first album, which was released under an ill-fated arrangement between EMI and Enigma. Certainly if *Freaky Styley* follows the path of its predecessor, it won't be for a lack of confidence. Flea's got enough for two bands and then some. "This record has good songs, good rhythms, good personality," he says, summing up his feelings about the album in a rapid clip that lets you know there's no room for argument here. "It's got character, it's got spirit, it's got humor, it's got soul, it's got passion. It's got the burnin' flame." □



"When we did this, we didn't think, 'Oh, let's get white guys playing black music,' says Flea. "That wasn't the concept; we were just partying."