

BASS MAGAZINE

ISSUE 6

THE BEST OF BASS

WIN!

A STONEFIELD
F SERIES BASS

STANLEY CLARKE

Live From Detroit,
A Legend Speaks

FLEA

HAGAR BEN ARI

EMILY RETSAS

JOHN LODGE

P-NUT

BARRY SPARKS &
TONY FRANKLIN

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INSIDE AN
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WE REVIEW:

STONEFIELD
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GK LEGACY 1200

EPIFANI UL901

Red Hot Chili Peppers

BLOOD, SUGAR, SEX, MAGIK, DRUGS, MISCHIEF & SELF- DISCOVERY

Flea takes us along for the wild ride of revisiting his chaotic childhood and musical upbringing in his new memoir, Acid for the Children

By Jon D'Auria | *Photographs by Jon D'Auria*

“I just loved feeling the metal strings under my fingers, the deep *thunk* as I struck them and invented my finger dances. That wood, the long piece of it, smooth and rounded on the backside so my

left palm could slide up and down it like when sliding down the banister and whooping it up in an old house with a big staircase. Those left-hand fingers gripping around the other hard, flat side of the wood, strips of metal

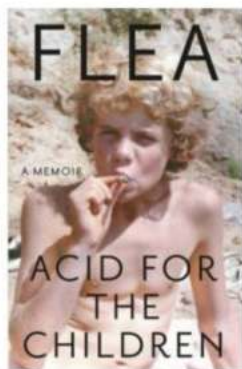




crisscrossing it one way, and the long metal strings floating magically above it on the other. Each of my fingertips with its own little brain excitingly plotting their moves atop the strings, all of my heart and body vibrating with the VOOM POP BOOM RAOOM BOP.”

To hear Flea interpret his earliest experiences of playing bass is an absolute thing of beauty. To learn the most intimate details of his turbulent upbringing, and the wild journey of morphing from Michael Peter Balzary into the rock icon he is today, through his own words, makes for one hell of a book. His new memoir, *Acid for the Children*, is Flea’s first foray into writing, and much like his unbridled approach to playing bass, he takes it on with both a master’s touch and the reckless abandon of a wide-eyed child on a sugar rush. The candid tell-all testimonial gives us insight into his childhood, which found him constantly trying to discover himself while navigating the vastly different environments of Australia, New York, and Los Angeles. Naturally, music is a central theme of his book, but the stories and random memories that he pieces together in short-burst chapters meld together like a pulp-movie coming-of-age tale depicting scenes of innocence, drug use, reflection, and ultimately, self discovery.

Beyond Flea merely waxing poetic about his youthful experiences and the family and friends who shaped him, we get to take a wild ride inside his head on his path to discovering music and connecting with it down to his core. We marvel in the moments when the bass first comes onto his radar, thanks to his mother’s loveable but problematic boyfriend, Walter Urban. The bebop jazz bassist’s frantic and emotive playing would cause a young Flea to roll around on the basement floor uncontrollably in fits of laughter and tears. We geek out when reading about the moment when founding Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist Hillel Slovak first convinces Flea to pick up a bass to join his band. And we revel in reading about his transformation as a bass player, his introduction to slap bass from a classmate named Ray, his first real band experience in Fear, and of course, when he met



READ

Flea, *Acid for the Children* [2019, Grand Central Publishing]

his musical soulmate, Anthony Keidis, at Fairfax High School. As expected, Flea's voice as a writer mirrors that of his persona as a musician — raw, from the soul, unfiltered, and truly one of a kind.

But Flea's new role as an author isn't the only thing that's been occupying him lately. The 57-year-old rocker recently married his longtime girlfriend, fashion designer Melody Ehsani, in a ceremony conducted by George Clinton that Flea beams "was one of the best effing days of my life." He's also stays heavily active in running the school he founded, Silverlake Conservatory of Music, which introduces youth to the positive outlet of music through education. And most notably, the Chili Peppers are working on their 12th album, which marks the return of longtime guitarist John Frusciante. While all of that might delay any possibility of a sequel to *Acid for the Children*, we can take solace that Flea is still actively writing his next chapters with every wild stage performance, every new riff laid down in the studio, and every passionate slap and pop on his fretboard.

I have no choice but to let the wild inhaling and exhaling of the godzzz push me relentlessly ahead, and to always surrender, come what may, to the divine and cosmic rhythm, on and on, to the break of dawn.... (page 6)

What sparked you to write a book?

What I've always been a voracious reader, and I've always been in awe of a good book. When I read something by someone talented, I'm so humbled and blown away that people can create art like that. I had been asked a number of times to write one, and I always hesitated, because I knew that I had to grow up before I could write a book. I finally relented and decided to do it, because it felt like a challenge. More so, I tried to get underneath the things that happened in my life to try to understand them clearly for myself. My first instinct is to be shocking and rant on about my opinions and all of the crazy shit I've done. I realized that I could write an enter-

taining book that way, based solely on shock value — but it wouldn't have told the story that I wanted to tell. My book is about a lot of things, but ultimately it's about dealing with feelings of pain, anxiety, rejection, and loneliness, and turning them into art. The God-given alchemy that all humans have, especially in the arts, is to consciously learn from our own pain and create something from those lessons that makes other people feel less alone. We all have hurt, we all feel disconnected at times, and art is the greatest tool in comforting us in those times. Everyone struggles and I've struggled, so maybe we can connect with one another, you know?

You play onstage for tens of thousands of people at a time, but telling your story is a much different experience. How vulnerable was this for you?

Playing music is turning personal experience into an abstract form, even if the music is a tangible thing. But to be literal about your life, and in particular for me, my childhood, it was not only scary to share that with everybody, but it takes a lot of work and it's a process to do it well. I wasn't just revealing myself to the world; I was revealing myself to myself. This was a huge journey of self-discovery. It can be a very joyful thing, but also a painful and scary thing. It was like how a sculptor chips away at a big block to make it a thing, and they keep chunking away the parts that are not the thing. That's how writing this book felt, like I was constantly chipping away the parts that weren't true to it until I was finally left with this book of my childhood. It's a scary thing to do.

How nervous were you leading up to the book's release?

Man, I'm nervous now. I've been going in and out of being nervous to terrified to anxious to feeling good about it. Ultimately, I take solace in knowing that I did my best to be respectful to everybody while keeping my truth. I was really thoughtful about writing in terms of the sensitivity of the subject matter, and I fell in love with the written word and the writing process. Putting my head down for two hours, putting pen to paper and coming

up from it...the feeling was very satisfying. I had engaged a part of myself creatively that's really healthy and good.

And that's how I became the bass player I'm still trying to be. Just exploring for a sense of purpose. Sometimes fun, sometimes bland or even grueling, but always pure. (page 206)

You've clearly found your musical voice, but was it difficult to find your voice as a writer?

My voice was easy to find. I write in my own way, and I know that everybody does who knows how to surrender to their heart and tries to create purely. Early on, my editor helped me with finding the rhythm within writing. At first I would write too much and it would be a rant, much like a solo on an instrument. My editor told me to think about rhythm and make it so someone can read it and feel a groove, and that resonated with me so much. That's when I started writing these little short stories that turned into chapters that were clean and cohesive. I remember talking to Patti Smith, who was really encouraging of me, and she said it's just like playing music: You gotta know when to solo, when to be supportive, when to scream and yell, when to rest, and when the song should end. Even though writing engaged a completely different part of my creativity, when I started thinking in musical terms, it gave my voice a place to exist.

You could have written the entire book about the Chili Peppers, but you don't bring it up in the main plotline until page 369. Was that always your intention?

At one point I consciously decided to just write about my childhood. It was a reaction to reading so many of the same old rock-star books. I don't have anything against them; a lot of them are great. But I thought it would be cool for me just to write about my childhood. I knew going into it that there would be a lot of Chili Pepper fans that would be disappointed. But once you become a musician with any success, everybody will ask you how you got to that point — they want that mys-

tery solved. So, to me, telling my childhood from my eyes was the clearest answer I could give to that. All of the stuff that led up to the Chili Peppers is what created me.

When I started writing the book, I was only going to write about the Chili Peppers. I felt it would be arrogant to write about my personal life, because everyone has a personal life and a childhood that's important to them — why would mine be so special that I want to write about it? I knew the band was interesting and that my personal and emotional relationship to it would be something people wanted to read about. But once I got going, I found a real beauty in the things I didn't understand. For one thing, my childhood is done. I'm a grown man. So I can have some degree of objectivity about my childhood. Chili Peppers are still going and will continue to do so. That story is still alive.

In the book, your first attraction to bass came from your mom's boyfriend, who played upright. Was that the first time the instrument came into your orbit?

I guess it was. I knew what bass was, and I loved music as a kid, but I wasn't around it much. When I was at home with my real dad, music was just background noise. When we moved into Walter's basement, all of a sudden I was living with this Bohemian jazz cat who had his upright down there and his 1970 Fender bass with a little roll-top Ampeg amp, and he played that shit all the time. The first time I saw him play with his friends, it changed my life forever. It was how he played bass, which was bebop; hard, swinging lines playing a music that works on so many levels. It was so cerebral and intellectual and so spiritual, all at the same time. It was an intense high bar of humanity being raised right in front of me. When I saw them doing that as a kid when I was seven, I just couldn't believe what I was hearing. I rolled around on the floor, and I wasn't doing it to be funny — the music was literally throwing me around. It was like I was taken over by the Holy Spirit. It was unfathomable to me that they could just sit down and do this. It was

like the entire world melted away except for them, and I absorbed it into my soul.

When Walter rocked his upright bass, he attacked it with a primal intensity that shook me. Every time. He wrapped his body around it like a boa constrictor squeezing the life out of a warthog in the jungle, dug so deep into those hard bebop walking bass lines, and swung like his life depended on it...His eyes closed in rapture, he was gone. All the anger, bitterness, and frustration of his life channeled into making this incredible rhythm. (page 52)

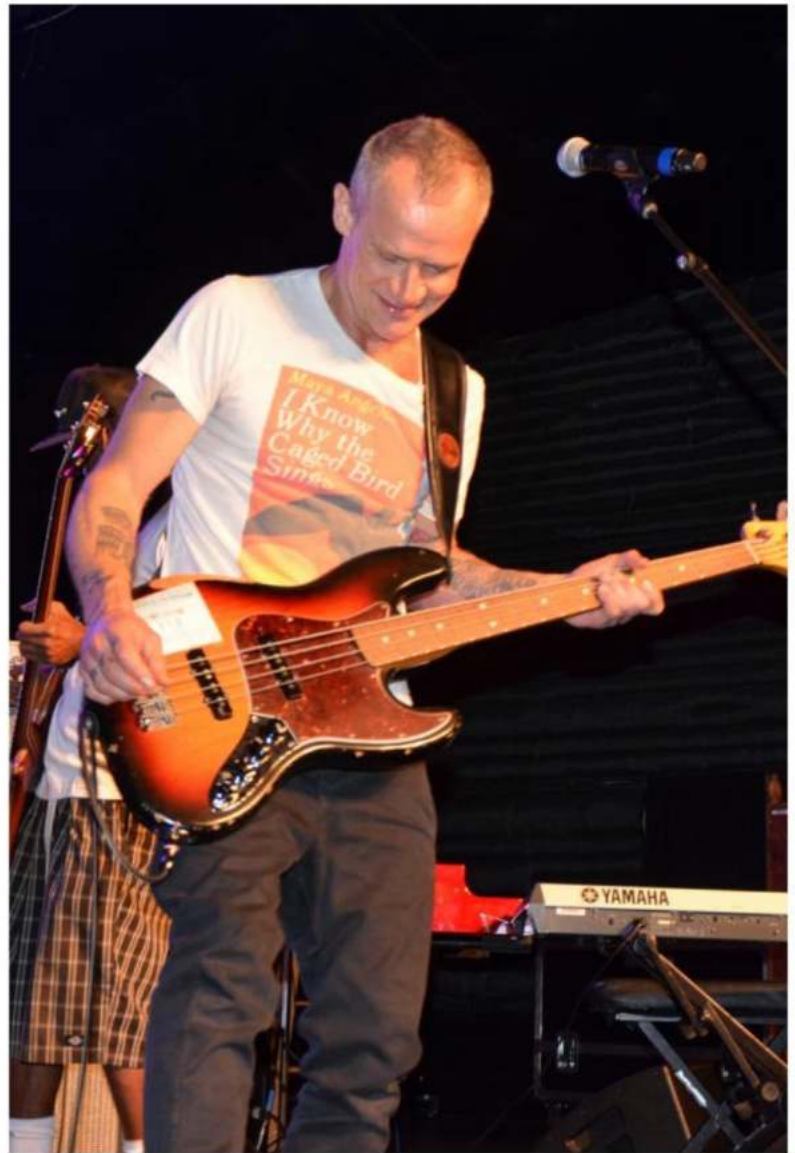
Did the way that Walter played his upright, with so much tenacity, influence how you play bass, even today?

When he played the bass, he would get so gone in the ether, and physically he'd rip into it so fast and go *ba-dom-dom-dom-bop-ba-do-do-do-do* with his walking bass lines. It was fast and hard and deep, and I could see all of the anger and hurt that he had, and I didn't realize that when I got into punk rock, that was exactly what I was doing. I was aspiring through a different vehicle of music to do what he did. And I still do. Anytime I'm at my best is when there's no thought and I'm gone in the rhythm and I'm just letting it take me. I think for all of us, in any art form, that's when we're all at our best — when we're beyond thought. Walter used to play like that, and thankfully, I must have absorbed that from him early on.

The bass engaged my imagination so differently than the trumpet. Blowing the trumpet, I dreamed of playing with the jazz greats, being in a majestic symphony orchestra, growing up into a respected man, cool and distinct. But as soon as I picked up the bass I was an animal. (Page 201)

You played jazz trumpet for a while growing up, and then you switched over to bass. Did you find that liberating?

Very. Bass was different. When I was playing trumpet, I was always reading off



the page and playing classical music and in big bands. I soloed badly, and I played shit that was already written, with a teacher looking over me the whole time. Then I started playing bass, and there were no rules and no teachers around, and I was just banging on it. All of a sudden it wasn't about learning this chord or this scale, it was about being cool and finding myself within the instrument that I was playing and being a badass. Then it was all about improvisation, and through that I developed my own style as a bass player. A lot of the rock guys would just learn Led

Zeppelin or Beatles songs, and I never did that — probably to my detriment, but I always just jammed. The bass really did set me free and became my voice.

You describe the first time you saw someone playing slap bass, in middle school. Was that immediately when you picked up that technique?

It was, and it blew my mind. I was floored. When I first tried slapping, I did it in a real standard way, and it took me a while to get my own style with it. I was amazed to see that kid, Ray, do it. It's like it opened a new portal in me. He showed me how he would not only strike down with his thumb and pop back up with his finger, he'd also slide his thumb down the neck to get that tidal wave sound. I was hooked.

Walt gave you a chorus pedal for Christmas because you wanted to cop the Jaco sound. What did his playing mean to you?

Jaco was a huge influence. It wasn't like I was trying to sound exactly like him, but I would play along with the Weather Report song "Mr. Gone." I never learned how to play "Portrait of Tracy," but I did learn how to play "Donna Lee" at one point. I was never good at replicating him, but I loved his sound and I wanted that chorus pedal. Percy Jones from Brand X used a chorus, too, so I wanted my tone to sound like theirs. I never used it with any great results. I wonder if I still have that. I have boxes of pedals, but if I still have that one, it would be a miracle. I'm going to look for it now.

You describe seeing Earl Liberty and the Circle Jerks live and becoming aware that music could take you out of your comfort zone. Is that the yin to the yang of comforting others with music?

It's kind of a microcosm. Some musicians, like my stepdad Walter, were big, scary, tortured people, but the music they play is so beautiful because of that. I was standing there in front of the stage, and all of a sudden Earl punched the bass with his fist, and I jumped because I didn't know what it was. I looked up and saw him in front of his amp, and it taught me that music can be a

scary jolt that wakes you up and rips you out of your comfortable place. At the same time, that music is still very comforting to me. I don't know about you, but sometimes if I'm in a weird mood or feeling out of sorts or disconnected, the most violent, dissonant, crazy music will calm me. In those moods I'll listen to Black Flag or later Coltrane, and it'll mellow me out. Sometimes the things that scare you in some context can be the things that heal you. I believe the purpose of music and art is to jolt you out of the mundane, out of everyday life. That is why we create.

Speaking of creating, how is the process for the new album going?

We've done a lot of writing and have a lot of material, but we keep starting and stopping because a lot of life is happening. We played a bunch of festivals and shows all over the world, and I got married and wrote this book. It's been one thing after another, but the ideas are there and the feeling is there, and so far I really love what we've done when we've gotten together. I never want to put a timeline on when we're going to get a record done, but in 2020 we'll be really earnest about finishing it.

On top of the forthcoming album, you mention in the book that you're going to write another one about the second half of your life. Can we still expect that?

To be completely honest, I don't know if that'll happen. When I wrote the first draft of the book, I wrote all the way up to our album *Californication* in 2000, but then I decided to cut it all and just leave it at my childhood — partially because the book would have been a thousand pages with all of that in it, and partially to keep it all about my upbringing. Right now I'm so caught up in the process of this one, I'll sit down and decide if I'm going to do another. I was certain about it, and now I'm on the fence. If it happens, it'll be because I'm inspired to do it and I'll put all of my heart and soul into it to do it at the best of my ability. If it never happens, fuck it — I wrote one book that I'm insanely proud of, and genuinely from the bottom of my heart, I hope everyone enjoys it. ●