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SERVING UP A NEW RED HOT BREW par Robyn Flans

Appearances can be deceiving; Chad Smith is proof of that. The Red Hot Chili Peppers are known as the quintessential sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll band. And at times, their individual profiles have fit the image. But for Smith, that image might be more fiction than fact. Don't misunderstand: Chad's definitely no choirboy. But this drummer is a fairly normal, albeit slightly eccentric, individual.

"Some people think I'm the guy hanging out of the limo with the Jack Daniels and the needle dangling out of my arm," Smith says, calmly seated in his lovely LA home. "We're definitely known for that - we've had drugs in our band and people have died. But believe it or not, I'm the normal guy in the band. Sure, we like to have fun, but there's nothing malicious intended. I've done some things in the past that might be construed by more conservative types as questionable. But you have to remember that, when people see an actor on TV who always plays the bad guy, they think he must be a jerk."

"We're entertainers putting on a show," Smith asserts. "We're serious about our music. But if we go on stage and have flames shooting out of our heads, it doesn't mean I go home at night and shoot flames out of my head while I'm drinking my Pepsi."

Smith keeps the band grounded, musically *and* personally. Although he enjoys his wild moments, bandmembers know he's the one they can always count on. Chad is the foundation for The Chili Peppers' amalgamation of musical ingredients. He analogizes his role as being the force that stirs the pot, digging deep into the stew to dish up the bottom.

While he's had no real formal training to speak of, Smith's personal drumming style pays homage to such past masters as Gene Krupa and Jo Jones, mixed with a helping of rock stylists John Bonham, Keith Moon, and Mitch Mitchell. Also heavy in the Smith sauce are funkmeisters Greg Errico, Clyde Stubblefield, and Zigaboo Modeliste.

But while Chad shies away from the title of funk drummer, he gratefully accepts the appellation of "funkiest rock drummer around." Mostly he's proud that he can play the right thing for the band's varied songs, which is a challenge considering there are few boundaries to The Chili Peppers' creativity.

This barrier-breaking is obvious on the band's new release, *Californication*, which marks the return of guitarist John Frusciante. Once again, The Chili Peppers cook up a zippy gumbo varied in flavor and rich with taste. And there's Chad Smith, right in the middle, serving it up.

Can you tell us about the creative process in the band and where the material comes from ?

CS: A lot of the songs come out of jams. We started writing for this album last June, in Flea's hot garage. We put our gear in there and just started playing.

Does somebody say, "I have this idea, I have this riff, I have this pattern in mind" ?

CS: There isn't any one way a song comes together. Sometimes somebody will have a riff, like John will have something he was playing at home, he'll bring it in, and say, "I have this part. What do you guys think?" And other times it's just us getting together and playing off the top of our heads.

Sometimes it's great and turns into a song like "I Like Dirt." Other times it sucks and we'll just go on to something else.

At what point do you abandon the process ?

CS: After about twenty minutes of playing the same groove it will probably fizzle out if it's not happening. Nobody will really say anything. If we like it, we'll say, "Let's record this," and if not we'll say, "Hey, let's work on that thing we were doing yesterday."

"Dirt" came really early on in the writing process. To me it sounded like a James Brown-ish kind of tight funk thing, and I came up with a kick/snare pattern that worked. Then we threw in some stops. A lot of times the first thing you play, the gut feeling you go for, is the best. Yet everybody in our band makes suggestions for the other parts. You can never rule out any input because you never know what's going to metamorphose into something great. It might be, "That's cool, but why don't you try this," or "Do something on toms," or "What about some loud, ringy, washy cymbals." Everybody does make suggestions, but lots of times it will be my gut feeling of how it should sound from what those guys are

playing and what will best complement the music.

Did the bass or guitar dictate your idea on "Dirt" ?

CS: Probably more the bass on that song, certainly in the verses. It's not a song where I'm playing really hard. This lent itself to my being able to play something a little busier, funkier, and tighter, so I could get away with a little more snare and hi-hat things.

What was the evolution of "Californication" ?

CS: "Californication" was one of the earliest things we had. We wrestled with it, even hated it, but it turned out to be one of our best things. Anthony had the words early on and we had some music to it. We struggled with the arrangement and the parts because it was kinda boring and no one was really excited about it, except Anthony. We were already into pre-production with Rick [Rubin] when John took the words home and came up with a simple guitar part for it. He brought it to the next rehearsal and it was completely different. He's so good at that.

When John quit the band years ago he got into drugs really bad and hit bottom, but now he's come back to the band so focused. He's been instrumental in the way this record sounds. Once he came in with a couple of new parts for "Californication" we were able to turn it into one of the best songs on the record.

What about "Get On Top" ?

CS: That was another jam. I wish I could explain the creating of the parts better, but it just comes from years of listening. It's something that is so difficult to put into words. There's no preconceived idea with us. It's not, "We're going to try to write a funky song today." It's how we feel on that day. Before I came to rehearsal, I mowed the lawn, I washed my car, and bought a six-pack of beer. Flea probably dropped his kid off at school, read a book, and talked on the phone. What everybody does just gets brought into the rehearsal room. It's really hard to try to explain it without sounding like an airhead - "Duh, I don't know, I just come up with it. We just jam and if it's good, we record it."

Did your part for "Get On Top" come from the bass part ?

CS: No. It's so bass-heavy because there are actually two basses on it, so bass players will be pulling their hair out trying to figure out how to do that. But John had the original wah-wah rhythm guitar part and Flea and I put our parts on top of it.

I suspect that when you and Flea went to add your parts, there was no conversation about it.

CS: There's rarely any conversation. We've been playing together for ten years, so we just fell in. John's part is kind of busy, but very rhythmic, and I just picked out little things that Flea was playing to accent. I wanted to choose things that would propel the groove yet still leave enough space so everybody else's part could speak.

Is it a conscious decision or just a natural inclination to insert your little ghost notes ?

CS: I'm a ghoster from way back.

Do you remember what started that ?

CS: I'm a big John Bonham fan, and he was a ghoster. I play so many ghost notes on this record that it could conjure up spirits. You can play simply, which I try to do, and when you add ghost notes it kind of rounds out the groove a little bit so it doesn't sound so stiff. It's not a conscious thing to put them in, it's just a personality thing. It just makes things more funky and fatter, and rounds out the groove a little more in between the backbeats.

Do you actually recall when and how you incorporated that into your style ?

CS: It probably came from listening to the records that influenced me when I was young. My brother is a couple of years older and he was into Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Black Sabbath. To me, Sabbath's drummer, Bill Ward, is like a hard-hitting jazz drummer. I saw them at the Forum and they were awesome! But all of that must have just seeped into my subconscious. I played along with all

those records.

You had a kit set up in your house as a kid ?

CS: I would set up in the house, the garage, or the basement, where it was nice and loud, and I could annoy the neighbors. My mom was very supportive. She'd call to me, "I'm going shopping now. It's a good time to practice if you want." I'd bang away with the headphones on and rock out like I was playing with Zeppelin or Hendrix.

You've talked about your three primary influences - John Bonham, Keith Moon, and Mitch Mitchell. Can you analyze the aspects of their playing style that have infiltrated your drumming ?

CS: I got the partying from Keith Moon. As you can see, there are ghosts. Keith Moon was the first guy I ever heard to incorporate such wild abandon. He had such personality, and it came out more in his playing than almost any other musician. No one else played like that. He was the first one I heard incorporate crashes in the middle of his fills. *Live At Leeds* and *Quadrophenia* are my favorite Who records. I don't play anything like Moon, but what really moved me was that he always sounded like he was having so much fun playing the drums.

So it was his attitude that you "adopted".

CS: Yes. It took me a while to figure out that you don't have to do little fills every four bars. When you're a young player, you want to do your Neil Peart stuff. He's famous for his solos, but what he played for the songs was the right thing. As I mature as a player - I hope - I understand more and more that it's important to play what's right for the song rather than try to call attention to the cool little fill that I practiced at home for two weeks.

I'm not a soloist. I'm a drummer who tries to play in a way that really supports the song and the other musicians. If you don't notice me that much, but it feels good, that's the highest compliment I can get. Jeff Porcaro - and I'm not in any way putting myself in a league with him - was a master at that. He might do that one little thing at the end to take it out, but everything felt so good.

You may not be out front, but the band is actually made up of four separate identities that come together to make one sound. So in a way, your individual style creates an important component to the band's sound.

CS: We've been blessed to have great players in our band. John Frusciante sounds completely different from Dave Navarro, which changes the complexion of the band and makes the other guys play differently.

So the style of each player is integral to the music that comes out, which implies that each person's individuality is noticeable.

CS: We're each a voice in the group. I think that's what makes really great groups, because if you take one person out of the band, it just doesn't have the same magic. Led Zeppelin didn't want to play anymore after John Bonham died, and The Who was never quite the same after Keith Moon died. But I'm talking about guys who will go down in the annals of rock music as huge influences. I'm not any where in their league.

RF: Where does Mitch Mitchell come into your style ?

CS: I would never pretend to be a jazz player, but his playing really influenced me. Those English rock drummers of the late '60s, like Mitchell and Ginger Baker, had that Elvin Jones thing. Elvin was jazz with a little bit of rock, and those guys were rock with a little bit of jazz. Mitch Mitchell had that tight drum sound with the more jazz tuning and free-flowing, spontaneous style that lent itself to Hendrix and him playing off of each other. That really turned me on. You could hear him *listening*. He had huge ears.

Listening is so important because so many players are caught up in their technique - this run, or this hand/foot thing - that they forget about their ears and listening to what's going on around them. The drummer has to hold it all together and make it feel good, so it's especially important for his ears to be big. And by the way, Mitch Mitchell was another ghost-noter. I liked his sound. It wasn't as powerful as John Bonham, but that guy could make a hell of a racket. He has a distinct personality on the drums.

There aren't a lot of drummers who have their own actual sound. Stewart Copeland does : You hear him and you know it's him. Phil Collins has his own sound, John Bonham and Mitch Mitchell, too. These are people whose sound is an extension of their personalities.

The people who don't have focused, strong personalities don't seem to have that kind of identifiable sound.

CS: When I was in high school I loved Neil Peart. I had a chance to work with an engineer who worked on a couple of Rush records who said Peart's personality really came through the music. He's a very smart, meticulous, structured, exacting player, which is his personality.

What provided the funk influence in your formative years ?

CS: I'm more of a rock player in a funk setting.

You're a very funky rock player.

CS: I'll go with that. Growing up in Michigan, probably listening to the radio and Motown, had a lot to do with it. I loved Sly and The Family Stone records with Greg Errico and Andy Newmark. Flea comes from a real funk background. He influences me, and it's a hard funk. It's not like Zig [Modeliste], it comes more from a rock base. I'm not pretending to be a funk guy who is all of a sudden going to try to play like Clyde Stubblefield.

My earlier funk experience was not just from listening. I played with former P-Funk percussionist Larry Fratangelo in a band called Pharaoh for a year. I was twenty years old when I joined the band, and Larry really helped me with the finer points of playing. He turned me onto Tower Of Power, P-Funk, and George Clinton, and really took me under his wing. That must have been where the funk seeped in.

Do you recall the Chili Peppers audition, where you had to apply all that had seeped ?

CS: When I auditioned for the Chili Peppers, they were kind of a college cult band that sold a few records. I wasn't a fan of the band particularly. They were just auditioning friends of friends and I had a friend who told them, "Chad eats drums for breakfast." So when I brought my drum's in to audition, Flea asked, "So, that's your breakfast ?" And I'm going, "Huh ?"

I set up and we started *rocking*. We just jammed. I didn't know any of their songs and they didn't care. There was musical chemistry right off the bat. I was playing and yelling in the back, and afterwards Flea said, "You were the first guy who was actually leading me. Most of the other guys were waiting. You just got in there and busted out."

It's that strong personality.

CS: Love it or leave it.

When you got the gig, was there any thing you had to do musically to prepare for working with them ?

CS: Anthony gave me a tape of some Meters and Funkadelic and said, "This is the stuff we really like," but it wasn't like, "Play like this." It was more like, "Check this out." I was totally open to it and we definitely had musical influences in common. And I think it was more that common lust for making the best music we could possibly make. I was, and still am, pretty dedicated. This is what I wanted to do, and I was passionate about it and I think they picked up on it.

Anyway, after the audition, they left a message on my answering machine, "Okay, you can have the gig, but you have to come to rehearsal with a shaved head." I had long hair at the time. I was like, "I'm not shaving my head !" I'm much bigger than those guys and they can't hold me down. [laughs] I think that was my initiation - just to see if I'd do it.

Does anybody ever have to pull you back or rein you in with the Chili Peppers ?

CS: That's more producer Rick Rubin's role. This is the third album we've worked on with him. He had done The Beastie Boys, Run DMC, Public Enemy, and Aerosmith's "Walk This Way," and he had Slayer and The Black Crowes on his label, American Records.

Back when we were first considering Rick, Anthony was concerned that he was going to turn us into some heavy metal, blood-drinking band, but Rick is pretty cool. He's softened up somewhat now, but

eight years ago he was always with sun glasses and the beard and he looked like he was drinking goat's blood. He's really a big teddy bear, though, the sweetest guy and smart and very musical.

Rick has a lot of the same influences that we do in rap and rock music, and he's our age. On *BloodSugar* he really helped us turn our jams-meet-raps into *songs*. That's his greatest asset. He's not a technical guy at all: He's not an engineer-turned-producer. He just knows what he likes. We'll have ten song ideas and we'll play them for him and he'll give us an objective, unbiased opinion. Sometimes we butt heads, other times it might be, "I like that part, but that other part doesn't do anything for me." Sometimes we don't have lyrics and he'll say, "I like it, but I've got to hear it with the singing on it." He's really good at melding our kind of unpolished musical sections into songs and helping us get in and out of sections. Rick has worked with great people, and because of our relationship I've been fortunate to work with people like Johnny Cash, and we got to do that LL Cool J thing ("I Make My Own Rules") for the Howard Stern soundtrack. For us, he's become like George Martin of the Beatles - he's the fifth Chili Pepper.

What would be a disagreement in the studio and how would it get resolved ?

CS: It really is a democratic situation where if somebody's playing something and one of us doesn't like it, we're very honest. We're lucky that we're not afraid to say, "I don't really like that", or "That part sucks". The worst thing, though, is to say, "I don't like it", without being able to give a reason. You always have to say why. If someone really doesn't like something, even if everyone else does, there's no reason to shove something down some one else's throat. It's never going to work anyway if somebody's not there. So we move on. We've got lots of ideas.

"Parallel Universe" is a real rocker.

CS: That's my Larry Mullen Jr. imitation. We were going to try to cut it with a click because it seemed like a song that would lend itself to using one, but it worked out without it.

At the end I hear your Keith Moon influence.

CS: It had even more on there than what's there now. That's a track where Rick Rubin said to me, "Leave that for the live version."

What are you doing on "Purple Stain" ?

CS: Jamming, rocking out. The bass line just stays the same, so Flea's the drummer on it. He's holding down the bottom so I get a chance to stretch out a little. The outro is as far as I go on this record, that's for sure. John is playing rhythm too, so I'm freed up to take the rhythm a little out side-not *out* out, but...

You sound like you're just about to fall off a cliff, but you make it back at the very last moment.

CS: That's a good feeling, as long as you don't take it too far over the edge, just far enough so you *almost* go over the cliff.

What inspired your part on "Porcelain" ?

CS: The drunken kind of feeling of the tune just made me feel like we should be sitting in some dirty, stinky, dank jazz basement somewhere. It's not a jazz song - it's in three-but it's just something I thought would sound right.

You used different equipment on it.

CS: I really felt the song needed a distinctly different sound from the regular rock drumset. I used a smaller kit with a bigger bass drum, with just a few mic's. We didn't use any close miking on that one.

You put yourself into the dank jazz club.

CS: Exactly. We turned off the lights and we all just vibed out. There's so much space in the song - lots of whole notes. And I've never used brushes on a Chili Peppers tune before that one, that's for sure. I'm sure no drummers will be writing in and asking about my brush technique, but it was right for the song. The cymbal was a big Sabian ride, probably 22" or 24" with rivets, and I just crashed on it. I wanted that big wash.

Did you immediately gravitate toward brushes ?

CS: Yes, probably more because of the volume and also because the song sounded to me as if it should be like an old record spinning with the needle falling off.

What's great is that you have the imagination to go beyond what would be considered the norm for the band.

CS: The cool thing about our group is that there are no boundaries to what we can sound like - and there never really have been.

How will your live sound and equipment differ on the upcoming tour ?

CS: I've pared down, not that I ever had a big setup. I'm just using one rack, two floors, a couple of cymbals. That limits how crazy I can get.

It can actually make you more creative.

CS: You're right. If you don't have as many options, you have to try to do things that sound more interesting with fewer things. In this situation, I don't feel the need to have a big drumset. Most of the stuff I do is just keeping the groove - hi-hat, kick, snare - with just a couple of fills thrown in. Buddy Rich didn't have a big drumset, and he made a *lot* of racket. Mitch Mitchell in the early days only had a four - or five - piece, John Bonham too.

Why did this record take so long ?

CS: It didn't take long once we started writing it. And then we cut the basic tracks in seven days - twenty-three tracks! Six years and seven days! It's kooky.

What were you doing between albums ?

CS: We tried to write songs with Dave [Navarro]. We went to Hawaii like we did for *One Hot Minute* and wrote a song before Flea and Dave went on the Jane's Addiction tour, which came out pretty good. When we got back together after their tour, it wasn't a healthy environment in which to create.

Don't you go crazy during the down time ?

CS: Yes. The worst thing about drugs and people who do drugs is that they get consumed by them and nothing else matters.

Things get done but it takes a really long time. It's so frustrating when you're around it. We recorded the basic tracks for *One Hot Minute* in '94 and Anthony didn't get around to singing on them until a year later, and that's really frustrating. I like to do stuff, but when that goes on, life is pretty much on hold. It's very selfish of the people doing the drugs, but they don't know it at the time because they're so self-absorbed in their whole thing. It doesn't just affect the person who is doing it, it affects everybody. I used to get mad about it, but then when I really saw the disease of drug addiction and what it does to people, I just had to feel sorry for them. When you see how good things can really be and you realize you could have *three* albums out in that time, it's very frustrating.

I have so much invested in this band and I'm proud of it. It's part of my identity. That's not to say I couldn't do other things, but I *live* the Red Hot Chili Peppers. If we sucked and were playing bad music or we were just cranking it out because somebody gave us the money to make an album, that would be a different story. But I think we're a great band and I don't want to give up on it.

Of the four albums you've done with the band, which are you most fond of ?

CS: My favorite Chili Peppers album is *Uplift Mofo Party Plan*, which I'm not on - Jack Irons played on that one. I think it's so great - the songs, the vibe - I enjoy listening to it over and over. Of the stuff I'm on, I like all our records.

When I first joined the group, it was a new thing and we were recording right away. While it had a freshness and it was exciting to me, listening back to *Mother's Milk* now, well, we don't sound like a real cohesive unit. It *sounds* like a new thing. There's nothing that replaces the thing that happens after guys have been playing together for a long time, writing songs, hanging out, and getting to know each other, especially in a band like ours.

Blood Sugar came so easy, recording at the house, working with Rick for the first time. It sounded like a band and I think it was the first time the Red Hot Chili Peppers really captured the way we sound

organically, just us playing in a room. Those songs lent themselves to being recorded that way, and we were very prepared when we went into the studio just like we were this time.

One Hot Minute was not like that. Dave had joined and it was new again, so we were kind of feeling each other out. The record has its moments, but it's a different band. When one person is replaced, it's going to sound different. It was cool. It wasn't a bad experience, although like I said before, it was kind of frustrating that the writing took so long.

Coming together and writing *Californication* with John feels like a natural progression of where we left off with *Blood Sugar* with him, and we're lucky to be able to have the chance to do it again. There's a definite chemistry that happens with the four of us, and this record went so smoothly. When we're able to just bang the songs out and we're only concerned with trying to get good performances, it's very easy. And when it goes easy, it's fun and everybody is in a good mood.

As I mentioned, we wrote the majority of this album in Flea's garage over the summer, and in October we went into a proper rehearsal place with a PA. We spent another month writing a few more songs and working on the ones we had. Then Rick came in and we worked for another three weeks with his fine tuning, bouncing ideas, writing more stuff. Then we went into the studio at the beginning of January, and boom-seven days for the basics.

Of your body of work with the Chili Peppers, can you pick a few representative tracks and give us the story behind creating them ?

CS: "Give It Away" [*Blood Sugar*] is one of those groove songs that is a good indication of who I am. It's a hard funk groove that's no-nonsense and straight-ahead. I think the drums propel the track, and it came so easy. We wrote that song so fast-it was a jam and it was done.

Another song on *Blood Sugar* I like is "Sir Psycho Sexy," which is a longer number, and it's slamming. We did a Robert Johnson cover on *Blood Sugar* ("They're Red Hot") as well, when we were recording at the house. We did it outside, up on a hill, at 2:00 in the morning with a remote truck. We put a little drumset up, it was late, and we didn't want the cops there - at least not right away - so we did a few passes at it. I ended up playing it with my hands - no sticks. It was kinda fast, and my hands were bleeding. At the very end of the song, after we stop, you can hear the cars on Laurel Canyon going by and some one yelling out their car window.

When we did "Higher Ground" for the *Mother's Milk* sessions, we had some difficulty. For some reason we weren't getting the right feel. I was doing a consistent triplet pattern on the bass drum that was crippling my calf muscle. I couldn't keep it going for the whole song, and I was pissed. The producer was coming out into the room, trying to cheerlead us to play it all the way through. Flea played naked, John played with us and then he left, and it was just me and Flea. But I couldn't get it. I finally had to leave it, but when I came back the next day we nailed it. It was the hardest track to get on that record and it turned out to be the most popular, so you never know. Some of the drums are triggered, which works okay for that track, but it loses the dynamics of my playing.

Speaking of dynamics, what did you do to develop that aspect of your playing ?

CS: Larry Fratangelo helped me with that. I think before then I would just concentrate on keeping good time and power my way through a song. We were in an eight-piece band and rehearsing, and sometimes it would just get out of control because there were no dynamics. Larry said, "Chad, you have to get the band's attention. They have to be listening to you, so after the solo, we're going to bring it down and that first beat needs to be really soft so they have to listen."

So it's not necessarily the loudest guy who gets heard ?

CS: Exactly. Larry said, "You've got to reel them in." Up until then I had just played the songs, and it was the louder the better. But when we added more pieces to the puzzle and everybody wanted to be heard, the next thing we knew it was just a wash of sound with no dynamics. He definitely helped me with that concept, and that's just about being a good musician and a good listener.

The drums are a big dictator of dynamics. The easiest thing for me to do is to play hard and fast. The hardest thing is to play slow and quiet. To be solid, consistent, and quiet takes great control. Larry's suggesting that in that band situation made all the difference. I still remember we were playing Tower Of Power's "What Is Hip?" and after the solo everyone went to wail. Larry said, "Listen to how

Garibaldi doesn't come in right away with the snare on the 2. He waits 'til the next bar."

What would you say are your strengths and weaknesses ?

CS: I think I have good ears - I'm a good listener, which is so important. On a more personal level, I think one of the strengths I bring to the group is a certain balance. If too many guys are way over the edge, too nutty, or too eccentric, it makes for an impossible situation. I think I bring a kind of grounding to the group. They know I'm always going to show up, I'm always going to perform to the best of my ability, and when they look back there, I'll be banging away and everything will be okay. Uncle Chad is there and they can count on me.

As for weaknesses, I think I'm pretty lazy. I could definitely work way harder at being a technically better drummer. I have a big house and I don't have a drumkit set up - it's ridiculous. This is a lame excuse, but I just enjoy playing with people so much more than playing by myself or practicing. It's definitely a lame excuse.

Any musical regrets ?

CS: I've been fortunate because I've known what I've wanted to do since I was a little kid. Right out of high school I knew I didn't want to go to college, I wanted to play music. So I went right into playing in clubs and bars. At the time I may not have been happy when I was banging it out in those Detroit clubs doing three sets a night, six nights a week, making no money, and wishing I could be in a big rock band. But I'm so happy now that I did that at the time because it really honed my playing. I wouldn't trade those experiences for anything. When the opportunity came to be with the Chili Peppers, I was ready.

I've been in the band for ten years, and I feel so fortunate. For one thing, most bands don't last ten years. I'm in a band that I enjoy playing in and one where I'm a part of the creative process. I'm so fortunate to be able to do what I love to do, to make a living at it, and to be in a group that I think makes great music. I can't have too many regrets on the musical side of things.

I can't think of another living band I'd rather be in. Sure, I'd like to play in Led Zeppelin or with Jimi Hendrix. But from a musical standpoint, this isn't a bad gig.