

DRUMMER ON TOP:

# The Red Hot Chili Peppers'

## CHAD SMITH

on the New Album, *By the Way*



**I**t's the last day of May, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers are almost finished mixing their new album, *By the Way*. The orchestral parts have been added to a song called "Midnight," and drummer Chad Smith has just heard the complete mix for the first time. "I'm not sure," Smith says seriously to guitarist John Frusciante about the song. "I haven't gotten my ears around it quite yet."

At this point, I think the interview is going to be at least half-serious. But then Smith turns to me, pulls the sheet of questions out of my hand and surveys them with mock disdain. "Shite," he says with his best Spinal Tap accent. "So shite." Then he makes fun of my T-shirt and hair, and it's clear to me that I've landed squarely in the exclusive domain of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

The ornate rug-draped studio they have occupied at the Village in West L.A. for the past month seems more like an impromptu Las Vegas wedding chamber than a multi-million dollar recording facility. But from this room comes one of 2002's biggest music releases.

by Patrick Runkle

photos: Annamaria DiSanto





*By the Way* is the band's seventh studio album since their eponymous 1984 debut record. The unique synthesis of funk, rock and metal that is their trademark has remained largely unchanged for the past 18 years and has consistently taken the band to the top of the charts. And as some of the world's most popular and recognizable rock stars—they've even been immortalized by *The Simpsons*—the Red Hot Chili Peppers don't have much to prove.

"The concept of this album is to put some really good songs together in one place," Smith says.

"We write the same way we've always written. The four of us get in a room and improvise," Smith says, describing the band's process for *By the Way*. "Song parts come from jams like that. There's no pre-conceived anything. We all contribute our personalities and our ideas into the song-writing process."

"We record the bits that are good, and the parts that are shit get tossed out. Anthony

[Kiedis] takes a tape from those sessions and comes back with vocal parts."

This songwriting and rehearsal process took about nine months for *By the Way*. At that point, the Chili Peppers' longtime producer, Rick Rubin, came in and started his work with the band.

"It's usually eliminating instead of adding," Smith says. "Rick comes in and tidies up our little jams, and turns them into better songs."

Rubin again handled production chores on this album, as he has for all the Chili Peppers' albums since he produced their monster hit *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* in 1990. "Rick is someone who has a lot of irons in the fire," Smith says, "and he's been here and been helpful in making every song the best it possibly can be."

"Often, the really cool thing that you worked up for three months"—Smith makes wild drumming gestures and sounds—"turns into something simpler on the record."

"But I'm not really here to impress the drummers," Smith says. "Maybe a few years ago, I was a bit more self-centered as a musician."

Then he chuckles, "Don't get me wrong, though. I'm still self-centered as a person. Where's my makeup lady?"

After getting the pre-production for the album done, the Chili Peppers headed to the studio in October 2001. "We recorded all the basic music tracks for 29 songs in about a month," Smith says. "Then we took a break for a month, and Anthony started singing his parts. Then we took another break, and now we've been mixing for about a month."

"We have a lot of songs this time," Smith says. I notice a handwritten list on yellow legal paper with all 29 songs posted on the studio door. "It's really a matter of getting them all good, and then picking the best."

About the process of whittling the recorded tracks down to a 16-song album, Smith tells me that each band member made a list. "All of us had the same 11 songs on there," Smith says. "The last five were different for everyone. But as long as those 11 are on there, I'll be happy."

On the sound of the new album, Smith says, "[*By the Way*] is a natural progression from *Californication*. It's very lush, and it's a

## By the Way Delivers the Goods

When *By the Way* hit the shelves of music stores on July 9<sup>th</sup>, the album's title track was already number one on Billboard's modern rock singles chart. But "By the Way" is only a hint of how good and consistent *By the Way* actually is. Here's an album that might just restore your faith in modern rock.

The Chili Peppers have evolved slowly over the years, but have been careful not to stray too far from their sun-drenched southern California roots. The most important innovation on *By the Way*—only hinted at on *Californication*—is they have overcome some of the more banal of their early influences by writing near-perfect songs that are inviting, sumptuous, and timeless. Still, they haven't



lost the hard-hitting rap-rock-funk edge that has defined their sound for the last 18 years.

On *By the Way*, the focus is also on memorable sixties-flavored hooks. Although in danger of being cloying, Rick Rubin's production consistently makes the right choices with the melodies the band has given him. The sound is fresh and perfectly accomplished in every song, right down to some well-placed vocoding and outer-space synth effects.

In terms of the songs themselves, there's an equal chance that "Midnight," "Universally Speaking," or "The Zephyr Song" will be radio staples by the time you're reading this. The Latin-flavored "Cabron" is a welcome change of pace, and the Beach Boys homage "Tear" (the paper kind, not the wet kind) is a masterful piece of songwriting.

Anthony Kiedis' lyrics and vocals are better than ever, and even in cases where the song's conception is a bit bland, the rest of the song's lyrics aren't. In the end, *By the Way* showcases a mature band at the height of its songwriting and performing prowess. — Matt Robbie



good piece of music all the way through. We don't make records with just one or two good songs."

Smith couldn't be more pleased with the current state of the band. "We're doing our thing. We're happy making music together," he says. "Having John rejoin the group, and after touring for a year and a half, we're really tight musically. And we're all on the same page personally. I think we're getting better at this process all the time."

"Creatively, we really are feeding off each other," Smith continues. "John has tons of ideas; that guy is an amazing musician. You have to come to rehearsal with your shit together, because John will write a whole new album in half an hour."

In terms of his technique, for Smith it's about simplifying the drum parts and finding something musical.

"A lot of drummers are concerned with their own world, and get caught up in it. 'I'll play like this, I'll do this fill, then go into the chorus on the ride,' and they're not listening to the song. There's no interaction with the other instruments. Drummers get a bad rap for that." He then launches into his best caveman impression: "Me drummer. Me hit things for living!"

Smith thinks ears are a drummer's most valuable tools. "Your hands and your feet are important, but if you're not listening, you won't be a good drummer," he says.

## HISTORY

Smith joined the band in 1989 before the *Mother's Milk* album. "I had a friend who was dating a woman who used to date John. And I heard that the band was looking for a drummer, so they called me out to a place called the Hully Gully, and I auditioned. Musically, we really hit it off, right off the bat."

*Mother's Milk*, released on EMI, was the band's fourth studio album, and the first for both Smith and Frusciante. Both members had joined in the upheaval following the heroin-overdose death of original member Hillel Slovak in 1988. While the band's

previous efforts had enjoyed varying degrees of commercial success, *Mother's Milk* was the first Chili Peppers record to seriously dent the charts, propelled by "Higher Ground," the band's Stevie Wonder cover, and "Knock Me Down," the band's tribute to Slovak.

The Rubin-produced *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, released on Warner Bros., followed in early 1991. It was wildly popular, selling seven million copies in the United States and spawning two huge singles, "Under the Bridge" and "Give It Away."

Personnel problems ensued again when Frusciante abruptly left the group during the *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* tour in 1992. After going through several guitarists, Dave Navarro joined the band for the next album, *One Hot Minute*, which was released in 1995. Although still a hit, the consensus

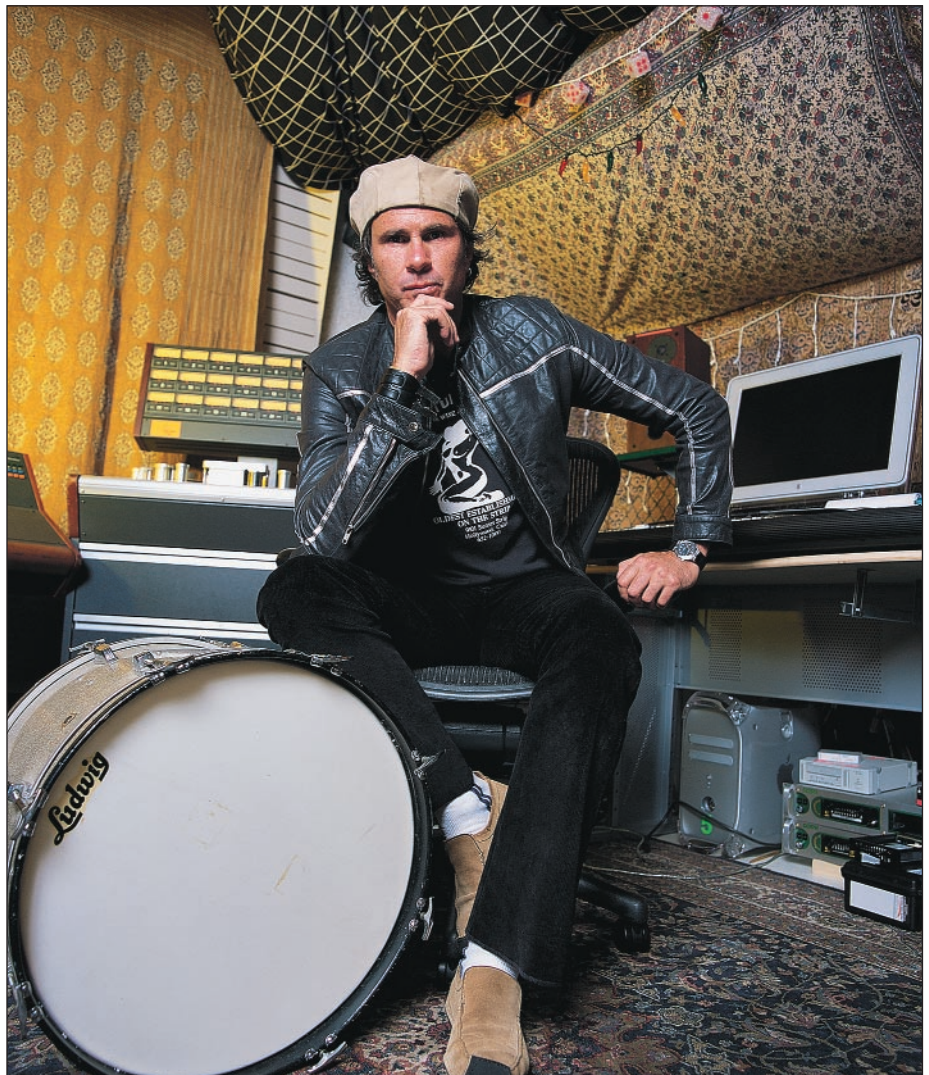
was that some of the excitement of *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* had worn off.

Frusciante rejoined the band in 1998, and the *Californication* album, released in 1999, was a massive hit that brought the band back to the apex of alternative rock stardom. After touring extensively for *Californication*, the band started work on *By the Way*.

## TECHNOLOGY

Smith's first bit of technical advice was very simple: "If it doesn't sound good, put a Pultec on it. No, put two Pultecs on it!"

*By the Way* was recorded on analog gear, which Smith believes is essential to the band's sound. "We're very into getting our warmth down, and so it's all Neve consoles and analog tape. The mic pre-amps are all warm stuff, and that's what I like for my drumming."



Chad shows off the 22-inch Ludwig bass drum used on *By the Way*.



The basic music tracks were laid down on a Studer analog multi-track machine through a vintage Neve Flying Faders board. Smith allows that Pro Tools may be great for some types of music, but for the “vibe” of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the band and Rubin believe the analog equipment gives the best sound possible. “What you hear on the tape is us playing together,” Smith says.

“At least, that’s what he says,” Smith grins. “Rick could be in there chopping up drum parts and not telling me.”

Smith defers to the Chili Peppers’ engineer, Jim Scott, when the topic of gear comes up. “The guy with the white hair drinking a beer behind the console, that’s our engineer.”

Scott has engineered, mixed or produced hundreds of records for the likes of Tom Petty, Oingo Boingo, Natalie Merchant, Wilco, and many others. He engineered and mixed for the Red Hot Chili Peppers on *Californication* and all their work since.

Smith relates how Scott became the Chili Peppers’ resident engineer. “When we were recording *Californication* at Ocean Way, we started out with an engineer who didn’t click with the band,” Smith says. “He was a nice guy and knew his stuff, but for

some reason it wasn’t working. We played for a few days, and no one was happy.”

“It didn’t sound like us, so Rick went down the hall, where Jim was doing another project,” Smith continues. “We had done a bit of work with Jim before, but he had never really engineered one of our albums.”

“As soon as Jim started, we were all like, ‘This sounds really good,’ and he got the job.”

Scott explains the gear he used on *By the Way*. “For Chad, we used a vintage, sixties-era white-shell 22-inch Ludwig bass drum that I found at a swap meet in Torrance,” Scott says. “We had a dozen snare drums, and we just rotated. One drum that would sound great one day wouldn’t sound good the next day, or the head would be shot.”

On selecting the drums, Smith explains, “What we would usually do would be to run through the song a bit, and Jim and I would go through the different drum choices we had. The snare was what we usually would change so it would fit the song better. I would change cymbals too. I like to call this one ‘The Ride Album.’”

Scott continues, “For Chili Peppers records, everything is tight and small. Everything is right here in your face. You can’t get away with a mediocre, dodgy drum set and just put a big room on it, and have the room sound be your drum sound. You can’t do that on this kind of record because there’s too much impact and too much detail. Everything is recorded without reverb or anything.”

Scott explains the recording process and microphones. “What we used was a classic early eighties rock setup that I learned from great producers like Ron Nevison and Andy Johns. On the kick drum, we used a Neumann U47, with a Sennheiser 421 stuffed up inside. The snare drum is a Shure 57 on the top and bottom, and I always put a KM84 on the top too, to get the good mic, bad mic combination going. I used 57’s on the hi-hats. Toms are either Neumann U87’s or 421’s, with a 57 underneath

the ride cymbal and another one stuffed inside the bell.”

Scott continues, “We spend the money on good mics for the overheads. We use AKG C-12’s on the overheads, because a lot of the drum sound and the details from the cymbals come from the overheads.”

In terms of overhead placement, Scott puts the mics “really close. Right outside of stick range.”

“And sometimes not outside of stick range,” Smith laughs.

“The only recording trick I use with the drums,” Scott says, “is to print one track that is a highly compressed kick and snare. That way, I have a track that’s all impact that I can sneak in and out of the mix for extra whack when I need it. It’s also a good safety when I’m recording live, to have an extra track of kick and snare handy. I use a Fairchild to compress that track.”

For all his use of vintage gear, Scott says there’s a limit to the amount of tube gear he’ll have during a session. “The important thing is to get the recording accomplished,” Scott says. “I never want to hear, ‘It would have sounded great, but this really weird gear I was using broke,’ or ‘That take was great, but some of the gear was humming and I didn’t catch it.’ If I have a choice between something that might break and something that won’t break, and at the end of the day they’ll sound almost the same, I’m going to go with something that’s a little tougher.”

“The other thing about Jim is that he’s quick,” Smith says. “When we want to change a guitar or change a drum, the session doesn’t grind to a halt. Jim’s so adept at working with us, and he keeps the creative flow going.”

For recording vocals, Scott says that Kiedis always uses a Shure SM7. “I bought Anthony a new one for this record, and he was the first to use it. It sounded great.”

The vocals for *By the Way* were laid down with a remote digital setup. Interestingly enough, Kiedis recorded his parts in the same bungalow at the Chateau Marmont on Sunset where John Belushi died in 1982.

“We do digital on the vocals for a couple reasons,” Scott explains. “One, we don’t



Chad lays down the law.



**Chad tries to rewire the console.**

have to be in a recording studio for a full day when Anthony's only going to sing for two hours. So we were able to set him up in a hotel room, where he was very comfortable, with an operator and a computer. Two, the comping is much smoother."

Scott continues, "He was still using my vocal chain, though. He took my console, and my mic and my compressor to the hotel room. It's just easier that way."

"The vocals are on tape now," Scott says. "We record them in the computer and comp them, and John sings his backgrounds in the computer. There are tracks stacked up high, and then when they're all decided, we dump them back to tape. We get plenty of distortion and warmth that way."

"I use a Urei 1176 compressor on Anthony's vocals," Scott explains. "It's a big part of Anthony's sound. It's almost better for a guy like Anthony, who's going to sing loud, to turn the mic pre down and the compressor up. That'll protect you on the back end."

On the process of recording the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Scott says, "We don't

say, 'Okay, are you ready? Let's go,' and start recording. We try to stay out of it. The tape is always rolling, and the guys are in there playing, and that's how we get it accomplished."

Scott continues, "For the Chili Peppers, there's nowhere to hide, because there's only three of them. If someone's out, there's no mystery about who it is, especially when we're laying down tracks."

"You've gotta find what's organic, and you've gotta be intertwined with the rest of the band," Smith adds.

## PLAYING LIVE

The extensive *By the Way* world tour will take the band through South America, Australia, Europe and Asia before they return to the U.S. for a lengthy run starting in early 2003.

"I still like playing," Smith says. "It's great; there's nothing like being out there and feeling the excitement of connecting with an audience."

"But it's not like the old days, where you did 20 cities in 20 days, and you're all

puking, shitting and fucking in the same room the whole time."

"No, we're spoiled, pampered little rock stars. Now, it's a private jet, and we're booked at the Four Seasons, and 'where's my fucking soy milk?' It's Spinal Tap, it really is. You have to keep a sense of humor about it."

"But we're fortunate that we can play all over the world, and take a day or two between shows so we don't kill ourselves," Smith says. "I still think we're one of the best live bands out there."

Smith says his style of playing in the studio differs from what he does on stage. "In the studio, you're capturing one moment of time forever," Smith says. "But playing live, you get to do it again tomorrow."

"I think live I tend to play more stuff. Somebody in Belgium's going to hear that fucking fill!"

On recording the Chili Peppers live, as Scott has for their most recent live DVD release, he says, "The last thing you want to do is drop in the middle of a live tour and say, 'Alright guys, I'm gonna take over. We're using my mics and my setup.'



You don't want to do anything to compromise the setup that's already working for the tour, like put in a new vocal mic that feeds back all night. There's a whole crew there, and they have an important job to do."

Scott continues, "I look at what's being used, and if I can tolerate it, I'll just take it straight. If I want to put up a couple more mics, I'll do that. I usually mike up Chad's monitors, which after six months of touring are usually pretty much where they need to be."

## ART AND COMMERCE

The Chili Peppers recently re-upped with Warner Bros., and the band's payday was huge. How does the Chili Peppers' art survive the commerce of the music industry?

"We don't try to make a commercial

record; we try to make a good record. It's really that simple," Smith says. "Did I think our last record would be our biggest record in terms of sales? No way. You never know, because the public's very fickle. You have to make music the way you want it."

Smith continues, "But I'm so happy that people buy our music, and listen to it and come see our concerts. I ignore it when people say, 'You guys sold out,' or whatever. I'm glad that our music gets played, and to have exposure for your art is great. I think we make real, honest music."

*By the Way* was released throughout the world during the second week of July, and is already one of the biggest records of the year. The set hit the *Billboard* album chart at #2, and it was the band's first album to reach the top spot on the U.K. album charts. By the time this magazine went to press and less than two months after its release, *By the Way* has reached Gold or Platinum certification in an amazing 23 countries.

In terms of media saturation, the first single—the title cut—has topped *Billboard's* Modern Rock singles chart for 11 weeks and counting at press time. The video that goes along with it, which features a kidnapped Kiedis being sped around L.A. by a deranged cabbie, is all over MTV. And the Chili Peppers have graced more than a few magazine covers (including this one, of course).

*By the Way* has gotten good notices from critics, and the consensus seems to be that the new record contains the same formula—albeit a bit more mellow than in the past—that has made the Red Hot Chili Peppers one of the world's most successful bands: Put a bunch of perfectly conceived and produced rock songs on a disc, and people will buy it.

But Chad Smith wants to make one thing very clear about the new album.

"It's not true," Smith says. "I did not have sex with midgets during this recording."