

## Red Hot Chili Peppers - Shiiiiit! We're alive

"Q Magazine" - Juin 2002

In their two decades together, Red Hot Chili Peppers have seen their share of the dark side of Los Angeles: the crumbling apartments, the seedy bars and, famously, that spot "under the bridge downtown" where their frontman Anthony Kiedis scored heroin, later immortalising it in a hit song. During one of his bleaker moments, Kiedis once described LA as "a stifling land of smog, violence and hate".

However, on a Monday morning in May 2002, Red Hot Chili Peppers find themselves in a part of town better suited to their buoyant mood. Santa Monica's Casa Del Mar hotel reeks of money. In the foyer hangs a colossal wrought-iron chandelier cradling a copper boat. It's stupid and ugly but expensively so. In a bar the size of a tennis court, guests survey the Pacific Ocean.

Upstairs, in three opulent two-storey suites, the band gather for the first public airing of their imminent album, *By The Way*, to a phalanx of European TV crews. When Q arrives, bassist Michael 'Flea' Balzary is already there, twisted like a pretzel into some implausible yoga pose. Q would shake his hand if only it were clear exactly where his hand was. He wears asymmetrical electric blue hair and navy blue shirt and trousers.

Kiedis follows. Sporting a precisely trimmed goatee, he is unexpectedly sombre for a man whose image has previously suggested an interminable adolescence. He proffers a half-handshake and a quarter-smile, which signal a wavy tolerance, but no great love, for the press.

Next is errant guitarist John Frusciante, who aided the band's path to megastardom, left to spend five years in the clutches of heroin addiction, and returned in 1998. Last time Q photographed the group, a straggly bearded Frusciante stuck out like the result of a hobo replacement scheme. Now he resembles Vincent Gallo playing Jesus of Nazareth, another famous resurrectee.

Finally, baseball-capped drummer Chad Smith barrels in, clearly not long out of bed. "I thought it was noon," he jovially protests. "Nobody does interviews before noon!"

You wouldn't immediately put these four men together, but their mutual affection is transparent. Flea and Smith make a wisecracking, sarcastic double act. Alongside Frusciante, Flea is more sincere and almost paternally protective. Kiedis and Frusciante comprise the most intense alliance.

The interviewer from British TV's *CD:UK* has met the group before, but only Smith recognises her: the rest aren't great with faces. She asks Kiedis for a precis of the band's history. She has asked the wrong band. Kiedis gamely rattles off a condensed chronology, but is practically incomprehensible to anyone not acquainted with their contorted family tree. "I wish Mel Brooks was here," he sighs. "Our history would be much funnier."

Next February the Red Hot Chili Peppers will be 20 years old; Kiedis and Flea will have been Chili Peppers for exactly half their lives. Only now has their number of albums (eight) overtaken their tally of guitarists (seven). As Kiedis later tells Q, they have been on the verge of calling it a day at least four times, usually in the wake of a disappearing guitar player.. And then there are the bits that Kiedis opts not to share with the *CD:UK* audience, namely their previous Herculean drug intake. Heroin killed founding guitarist Hillel Slovak in 1988, poleaxed Frusciante and has plagued Kiedis intermittently.

"Is that a brief history?" the frontman asks when he's finished. Then, as if he'd temporarily forgotten the whole point. "Oh, we had fun. We had a lot of fun, too."

If anyone decides to make a Red Hot Chili Peppers biopic, the most apt title has already been taken by M. Night Shyamalan: *Unbreakable*. The tagline they could filch from Nietzsche: what doesn't kill them makes them stronger.

It's been five years since the band last contemplated dissolving, a record for them. In 1997, Dave Navarro, the Jane's Addiction guitarist recruited to replace Frusciante, wasn't fitting in and the album he appeared on 1995's muddled *One Hot Minute*, was both a commercial and creative disappointment. Kiedis had been using heroin again, while Flea and Smith were ready to quit.

Read any interview from that period and you'll see that the group are masters of "We've never been happier" rhetoric, even when the truth is very different. These days, though, it's hard to disbelieve them. *By The Way* marks only the second time they have recorded two successive albums with the same line-up. The last occasion was during Frusciante's first stint: *Mother's Milk* (1989) and *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* (1991). If the guitarist's departure derailed the band after the breakthrough success of the later album's 8.85 million sales, this time there's nothing to stop them building on the unexpected career high of '99's *Californication*, which has cleared a remarkable 12.5 million copies.

Rick Rubin is back in the producer's chair for the fourth time in a row - Kiedis says they never considered anyone else but By



The Way does not chart familiar territory. Aside from a brief flurry on the title track, there is no sign at all of their trademark funk-metal. Instead, there are mellifluous harmonies (think Smile-era Beach Boys and any-era Beatles), avant-garde quirks and the most fluid, untethered playing of their career. Frusciante has gone all Jonny Greenwood, expanding his repertoire to synthesizers, mellotron and overdubs, and taking inspiration from techno boffins Autechre and Boards of Canada. In late 2000, he and Flea moonlighted on Tricky's Blowback album and formed and unnamed Joy Division covers band for just one gig: consequently the bassist's playing now owes more to Peter Hook than Bootsy Collins. Kiedis's songwriting, meanwhile, is wise and persuasive.

When many bands might have settled into a comfortable holding pattern after 20 years, the Chili Peppers have made an expectations-confounding new album that reiterates their skills as musicians and songwriters and demonstrates a refreshing reluctance to sit back and trade off past glories. They have finally, decisively, grown up.

It would not, however, be a Red Hot Chili Peppers record without some strife along the way. Towards the end of the Californication tour, Frusciante was locked into a stressful relationship and suffering from psychosomatic back pain. For much of that same period Flea was even worse, reeling from a traumatic break-up with his girlfriend of five years and wracked by panic attacks.

However, mid-way through the tour, Flea experienced an epiphany after a conversation with self-help writer Caroline Myss. "She said, Everytime you go on stage you feel you have to prove something to the audience and you don't have to prove shit. You're gonna kill yourself that way. And it was some of the best advice I ever got in my life. That was definitely a watershed moment."

Frusciante meanwhile is blissfully happy with his current girlfriend, 19-year-old Stella Schnabel. She's the daughter of artist/director Julian Schnabel (Basquiat, Before Night Falls), who provides the faintly disturbing cover art for By The Way.

Frusciante and Kiedis worked on the vocals and overdubs for several months at the Chateau Marmont, where the guitarist was living. It seems strange for Frusciante to return to the same hotel where he almost wasted away at the height of his heroin addiction in '97, but Kiedis contends otherwise. "There's no reason to pretend like it didn't happen. It was pretty dismal and scary but we lived through it."

None of the band need prompting to sing Frusciante's praises. When the guitarist was first in the band he was closer to Kiedis than Flea, but it was the latter who maintained a friendship in the following years while the singer simmered with 'animosity'. During the frustration following One Hot Minute, Flea told Kiedis that if they didn't try to get Frusciante back, he was leaving. So, after a fraught separation from Navarro, that's just what they did.

"All that resentment just evaporated instantly," says Kiedis. "It's like a boyfriend-girlfriend thing. Sometimes you're so fucking hurt by somebody that you won't allow yourself to be friends with them. It doesn't mean that deep down you don't love them. But, you know, ego. Ego and mind games."

"New Agey as it sounds, I think we were put on this planet to make this special, magical music," says Smith. "When he came back we realised that. We don't take it for granted now."

And what a curious chemistry it is. They don't live in each others' pockets anymore, nor has their friendship become a mere business arrangement. Their bond is both genuine and, to the outsider, unfathomable. As Rick Rubin says, "They're very different individuals. Each has their own world."

At the Casa Del Mar, the CD:UK interviewer asks Flea and Smith who their favourite British bands are. Smith names Ocean Colour Scene (he's friends with Steve White from Paul Weller's band). Flea opts for the Prodigy and Aphex Twin.

"I think English people are repelled by me," he tells Q later, only half-joking. "One newspaper called me an oafish troll so I'm going to hold that against them for the rest of my life. Spirituality be damned! I'm gonna be bitter."

Flea ("because I was little and jumped around a lot") is the Chili Pepper who most personifies the band's contradictions. He's the one with the dyed hair and the daft voices (which he's employed in The Big Lebowski and cartoon The Wild Thornberrys) and the fondness for disrobing on stage. But he's also the meditator who prays before every meal and who likes Kurosawa films and avant-garde jazz. In the rockstar DNA blender, he's equal parts Thom Yorke, Sting and Blink-182's Tome Delonge; a strange brew.

Sat at a table in the hotel suite some hours later and having eschewed all animal products for the last few months, Flea is tearing into a heap of chops with the gusto of a recently released hostage. Until Rick Rubin introduced him to transcendental meditation in the mid-90's, Flea's tendency to ricochet between extremes was even more dizzying. "When I first met Flea, it was difficult for him to communicate," says Rubin. "He's be racing off in a lot of different directions and not making much sense."

Until 1992, Flea alternated between voracious drug consumption and short-lived puritanical spells. These days, like Kiedis and Frusciante, he doesn't even drink or smoke, but knows the 'oafish troll' image lingers.

"Anyone's feelings would be hurt when people say you're an asshole," he reasons. "Y'know, sexist frat-rock, jock, shallow-minded party music. But does it impress people that I read Celine and listen to Thelonious Monk and watch Cassavetes films? I don't know. Stuff in the centre of pop culture has never really interested me that much."

The Red Hot Chili Peppers' status as the Lollapalooza generation's class clowns, multi-platinum sellers and reluctant godfathers of rap-metal has obscured their left-field origins. In their early years, when other LA metal bands wore spandex, they worked with George Clinton, Gang of Four's Andy Gill and Captain Beefheart's drummer, Cliff Martinez. But then, if the Art Ensemble of Chicago had appeared on album sleeves with socks over their penises as the Chili Peppers did on '88's Abbey Road EP they'd probably have had credibility problems, too. But, as Smith explains, "We may jump around with socks on our dicks, but when it comes to making records, we don't take things lightly."

Still, despite the Chili Peppers' somewhat boisterous sexuality, and a run-in with the Florida police after spanking a female stage invader in 1990, Flea bristles at charges of sexism.

"Perhaps I'm wrong, perhaps I didn't feel we were ever sexist. I always felt very much in the feminine. So I don't feel that different, I just feel a desire now, if I can, to contribute to the feminist cause." Only a Californian could say such a sentence with a straight face. Does he, then, regret the wrong impression given by his previous exploits? "I don't really mind, I embrace the cock-waving lunatic. I think it had its place." Is he gone for good? "No, the cock waving lunatic likes to have a laugh. Perhaps the cock-waving lunatic is more conscious of how he affects other people."

When you survey the current US rock scene, most of the bands who aren't brandishing their childhood tragedies like medals are in some way indebted to the Chili Peppers' socks-on-cocks hi-jinks. Soberingly, Sum 41 are just about young enough to be Flea's children. He pleads ignorance of most rap-metal (his 13 year-old daughter Clara is more of a Stokes fan) but acknowledges that if there's an influence, then "They take the most male part of it. It's like hair bands in the '80's. Led Zeppelin had so many different sides to them, but everyone wanted to steal this macho suck-my-cock heavy metal."

Flea's only regret about the old days is his promiscuity. Currently, he's at the other end of the extreme. "I'm a bachelor, man. [Mock-bawling] A lonely man nearing 40 and I don't have a girlfriend."

And then he has to head home to Malibu, an hour out of town, before Clara goes to bed. "Last week, right after I died my hair blue, her friends came round and she wouldn't let me go outside and say hello to their parents," he reports. She was like, [mortified voice] Oh please don't. It happens all the time." Every day that the 'cock-waving lunatic' remains on sabbatical, one 13-year-old girl must be very relieved.

Before meeting Q, John Frusciante lies on his back in a darkened room listening to The Beach Boys' Smile sessions and emerges serenely refreshed. Though musicians habitually claim that music is their life, few take that credo quite so literally. Frusciante first won his place in the band with note-perfect renditions of every Hillel Slovak guitar part and still practises from dawn till dusk.

He spends the interview with a beatific grin on his face. Although better than he once was, he still has a precarious grip on the world outside music. He doesn't drive (in LA, the height of eccentricity) or follow the news - and it shows.

"Making art is about accepting what's going on around you and turning it into something beautiful, no matter what it is," he mumbles. "During this record we had the catastrophe at the Empire State Building and we just kept on writing."

His being the only man in America who isn't sure which building collapsed on 11 September may be alarming but, after what Frusciante's been through, it's perhaps enough that he's still enough.

When he auditioned for the Chili Peppers, he was still in his teens (he's 31 now) and his militantly punk ethic didn't gel with life in a rock band in the first flush of global success. His reaction was to recoil.

"I was smoking pot night and day and I went through the world thinking it should be the way I believe it should be. And if it's not like that then I'll shut that part of the world out. I was scared I'd lose my ability to be creative. I thought being a heroin addict and making my life nothing but good feelings was the best way to maintain being a creative person. But it's not."

After leaving the group in '92, Frusciante slowly faded from view. He released two minor solo albums (1995's Niandra LaDes and Usually Just a T-Shirt, and '97's Smile From the Streets You Hold) later admitting he cobbled together the latter purely to raise drug money. By the time an LA reporter tracked him down to the Chateau Marmont in 1997 he was all but forgotten.

"It got to the point where there was no-one looking at me the way people look at you when you're famous, with that love even though they don't know you," he says. "I was getting physical pain. I felt like childhood traumas that I had never even felt existed were now coming up to get me. This life that we're trussed into when we become rock stars acts as a kind of doctor for us and we don't even realise that it's happening. We just take it for granted."

Frusciante returned to the group for the recording of Californication and is now playing better than ever, passionately in love (his girlfriend "wants to help crack babies in hospital") and utterly convinced that he will never relapse.

"I'm not scared of going back on drugs. I don't see it as being a possibility."

Really? How come?

"I guess I'm just lucky. I like people smoking pot around me. I really just like the way it smells."

When Frusciante removes his lumberjack jacket, his arms are a ruin of scars and patches. He says that when he looks at an old picture of himself lean and boyish and still in possession of his own teeth he doesn't recognise that person.

"I remember it like I'm remembering somebody else's life. I remember how spirits at that time were plaguing me and insulting me all the time. It was good. Because what I was capable of compared to what I was doing was so huge, so the spirits were giving me hell for it."

Do you still get those spirits?

"They like me now," he beams. "I know how to work hard to make them happy. I like the idea that I'll never be in the position of having nothing to eat and nowhere to live again. And I love being able to buy as many records as I want to buy."

During the recording of *By The Way*, Red Hot Chili Peppers decorated the studio in order to feel more at home. Some members brought tapestries or film noir posters or incense. Chad Smith brought a picture of dogs playing poker. "You familiar with that one?" he says with a throaty laugh. "Ha! That was my inspiration."

Smith is one of those drummers who seem to consider it their duty to act in a drummer-like-manner. A couple of years ago he attended a 'drum clinic' in England with fellow sticksmen from the likes of Jamiroquai, the Prodigy and Iron Maiden. It sounds like the set-up to a light bulb joke. "Drummers are the nice guys of the band," he says. "They're more normal and stuff. Those guys out front, I dunno about them."

Smith's smoking Marlboros now, jamming the stubs into Flea's lamb chop massacre. He looks like he should be the star of a sit-com about a skirt-chasing baseball coach. However, Q's suggestion that he is the least troubled Chili Pepper prompts an explosive roar of laughter.

"It's all smoke and mirrors my friend. I'm the worst, heheheh! But, yeah, maybe it's part of my role in the band, being the drummer. I like the other guys to feel like they can always count on me. But, you know, there's dark places."

When was the last time you went to extremes?

"Pretty recently, heheheh. It's been, like, the last three months. Up until about two weeks ago. I had things I didn't really want to confront, I got into a pattern of numbing myself with alcohol, and I was fucking shit up in my personal life. I'm not like, [whining] I'm never gonna do anything ever again! There's just a point like, h this is no good. I'm a grown man for god's sake!"

Smith is a father twice over, divorced from the mother of five-year-old Manon, but still with the mother of 16-month-old Ava. Recently, he was the first band-member to turn 40 (Flea and Kiedis are 39), and celebrated with a "pimp and ho" garden party. "John came as a giant pimple and Flea came as a garden hoe," he reports. "Very clever, those two, verrrry clever. My mom came out. She was a good-looking ho."

Contrary to rumour, Chad doesn't travel on a separate tourbus; he laughs at reports that he's nicknamed the others' vehicle 'the tofu bus'. "We hang, not as much as we used to, but it's not a substance thing. I don't feel I have to go to yoga meditation class with Flea to feel connected. I'm not really at that point yet. I'm getting there, though."

What are your interests outside music?

"I like to ride motorcycles. I like to scuba dive. My favourite colour is red."

Tonight, Smith is off to LA's Viper Room to an ironic hair metal club night called Metal Shop. Yoga can wait.

The following lunchtime, Anthony Kiedis goes to his favourite vegan restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard. It's been said that LA is the only place where famous people can feel normal, and today, like most days, he's just another diner, tucking into a bowl of black bean soup.

Between the ages of six and 11, Kiedis lived in Michigan. He has spent the rest of his life in this city. His father Blackie Dammett was an actor and, when he was 14, Anthony appeared in a couple of films under the name Cole Dammett. But his role in 1978's *F.I.S.T.* as Sylvester Stallone's son was something of a disappointment. "I had one line. It was, Pass the milk. And I think you can just see my arm in the frame as I say it."

When Kiedis devoted himself to music instead, he was determined not to let it fail, even when Hillel Slovak and drummer Jack Irons left to join another band before they'd even recorded their first album. "I was left there sobbing, thinking, Well, there goes my plan to conquer the world. But six hours later we regrouped and said, OK, we can't let this die now."

Kiedis has shown similar resolve at several crunch times since, but his iron will leaves little space for frivolity. He sits bolt upright, hands clasped together on the table like a guest on *Newsnight*. He is slow to smile but, like Bruce Willis, he has the kind of mouth that takes little prompting to twist into a mirthless smirk if he dislikes a question. He laughs twice in an hour.

Several of the lyrics on *By The Way* suggest a sunny optimism quite at odds with Kiedis's normal mood. One factor was his girlfriend Yohanna, whom he met, *Don't You Want Me*-style, when she was a hostess in a New York restaurant. With awful timing, the couple split while he was recording the songs she inspired. "Those feelings are still there. If anything, you get that extra dimension of sadness that makes it even more meaningful and satisfying to sing."

So what happened?

"I was ready to go all the way and she wasn't really into having a family and she got on this career path and we just wanted different things. It's not like we ever really fell out of love."

He changes the subject to the quality of his soup. Unlike his bandmates, Kiedis has little taste for self-analysis. He bats back several questions about the future or his motivations with a curt, "I don't really think about that," or smothers them in dippy Californian gush. When he's in a funk, so to speak, he prefers to go on an adventure. In the past he's dealt with bad times by trekking in Borneo and India.

"I constantly have a degree of wanderlust," he says. "I just like to go and see new places and be in nature. I've gotten a lot more out of the ocean than I have out of a shrink."

Another area Kiedis would rather not examine too deeply is his own history of heroin use. When Alice In Chains singer Layne Staley dies recently, he could, "definitely relate. It makes me think, *There but for the grace of God go I*, or most of my friends."

He refuses to discuss his rehab method (he's been clean since 1997) because he's concerned that if he relapses people will infer that the process is faulty. However, he hasn't banned drugs in his touring party, as Aerosmith famously did, and refuses to preach. Does he share Frusciante's confidence then?

"I worry about myself a little more. You know, there are times when I'm tempted just to fuck it all. But I don't. There was a time when I thought I would live and die sober without any question but, y'know, a couple of setbacks and it sort of fucked with my thinking about that."

Life outside the Red Hot Chili Peppers is something he doesn't really think about, as if the mere thought might jinx them, and he never dreams of a quieter life. He enjoys a degree of fame, which has never become overwhelming, but could he handle not being famous one day?

"It's too late for that. I think all you have to do is be in the public eye for 10 years and you've sort of sealed your fate."

You'll be the guy who used to sing that song

"Yeah. Remember that guy? You shoulda seen him in his day."

Back at the Casa Del Mar, Kiedis claims that, "I feel like we're just getting started". It's another bit of familiar rock speak that actually has a ring of truth here. The Red Hot Chili Peppers have always moved forward, but previously they hurtled or lurched or stumbled forward. Now, perhaps for the first time, they're striding steadily into the future.

"Who would have thought that *Californication*, 18 years into our career as a rock band, would have been our biggest album?" ponders Kiedis. "With this album we had so much stuff. We never felt we were hitting writer's block or feeling the pressure in any way. Nobody talked about sales and there's nobody punching cards when it comes to working. We do it all in our own time."

Life is good then for the Chili Peppers?

" Barring some unforeseen meteorite coming through our path, we'll be alright for a while."