

Rhythm 2004

Twenty years ago, the Red Hot Chili Peppers started performing in LA's clubs and bars. So has the band's enthusiasm been dimmed by two decades in the biz? Not a bit of it, says Guest Editor Chad Smith, as the Chili Peppers prepare for some huge summer shows...

It's an unusually clear day in Los Angeles and Rhythm photographer, James Cumpsty, and I are making the most of the stunning view of the city from the high vantage point on Mulholland Drive, nestled in the heart of the Hollywood Hills. As we study the sprawling metropolis below, the throaty roar of a motorbike can be heard humming in the distance. It sounds like our date for today, the irrepressible Chad Smith, is on his way...

A short while later and the crowd of tourists-who have also come to enjoy the panorama-have found a much more interesting spectacle to watch instead...As I drive the hire car slowly down Mulholland, Mr Smith has become the centre of attention. He is posing on the back of his treasured Harley-Davidson-pointing and laughing at the camera-while James, who is hanging precariously out of the passenger window as his subject zooms by, snaps away. To be honest, it's quite a relief when Chad suggests that we head back to his house to do some more serious shots of him with his vintage Slingerland drumset-a present from his good friend this side of the pond, Steve White.

After the phenomenal success of their last two records-Californication and By The Way, which have propelled the Chili Peppers to new heights of popularity-Chad, Anthony (Kiedis, vocals), John (Frusciante, guitar) and Flea (bass) have been enjoying some well-deserved time off in recent months; it's their first proper break since John, the catalyst for the band's rejuvenation, rejoined the group in 1998. Now they are back in the rehearsal studio though, preparing for a series of giant summer shows, including six dates in the UK. A whopping 250,000 tickets for their three Hyde Park gigs sold out within hours. Impressively, 20 years after they first got together, the Peppers find themselves more in demand than ever...

But while Chad may have been relieved of his Chili Peppers duties in recent months, he has certainly not been taking a break from his treasured drums. As well as forming a close musical partnership with Deep Purple bass player, Glenn Hughes, he has also played live with a diverse array of artists including Motorhead's Lemmy, Lisa Marie Presley, Matt Sorum and Duff McKagan from Guns N' Roses, Dave Navarro and Chris Chaney from Jane's Addiction, Green Day's Billie Joe, Steven Tyler from Aerosmith, Willie Nelson, Ted Nugent, Sammy Hagar, Toby Keith, Steve Jones from the Sex Pistols and Tommy Lee. Not bad for a guy who is supposed to be on holiday...

Rhythm: You must be looking forward to getting back out on the road and playing with the Chili Peppers again?

Chad Smith: "This is the first real break that we've had since writing Californication, and we've enjoyed having some personal time after five years of pretty much solid recording and touring. It feels a bit like the end of the summer holidays does when you're a kid, you know? Part of me still wants another off to surf, hang out with my kids, spend time with my new wife and ride my motorcycle...But after seeing Flea, John and Anthony this morning, I'm excited about getting back in the swing of things. And we have so much to look forward to."

Before taking this extended holiday, the Chili Peppers released a Greatest Hits package--which also features two new songs--and a live DVD, recorded at Slane Castle in Ireland. Tell us a bit about those two projects...

"Doing some new songs was awesome. Usually when we've been out on the road we stop, take a break and then write--we are never normally in touring mode when we record. This time we went straight into the studio.

We were in good playing shape and are very excited about the new material. Two songs are on the Greatest Hits and we'll continue work on the others after the summer gigs.

"Even though our shows are pretty consistent we were all nervous before Slane. A good nervous, though. Documenting a live performance in that way brings added pressure, and we just wanted to do our very best. I found myself in a completely different headspace on-stage; it was hard to clear my mind and play normally. We are very happy with the results though and the setting could not have been more beautiful."

While still retaining the loyalty of your older fans, the Chili Peppers have also been embraced by a new, younger generation of supporters. It's certainly not an easy question to answer, but what is it about the Chili Peppers that enables you to appeal to such a wide audience of different age groups?

"I really don't know but we so appreciate all the support, and it's cool to see mums, dads and their kids at our shows. We have a genuine love and passion for our music and playing together, and it's still enjoyable and challenging. I think people pick up on those things. Hopefully, we are still writing better songs and becoming better players as well--things every artist should want to do. It's funny but I don't think the kids see us as an old band--even though we've been around for 20 years!

"All four of us are serious about what we do, but you can see that we are also having fun. Rock 'n' roll is supposed to be fun and I think there is a connection with the kids because of the youthful way we present our music. We jump around because that's the way we feel when we play--it's the only way we can do it. We're like big kids ourselves..."

You don't say! Even though you put on a fancy suit for the photos today, just for the record I'd like the readers of Rhythm to know that you are now sporting a Mickey Mouse T-Shirt.

"And me, a married man in my 40s! But I am a big kid and I've been rewarded for being a big kid for a long time. And that can be dangerous, because the more you are allowed to do the wilder you become. Our band has seen the good times, but we've also seen the downsides. Yes, we've come out the other end, but we could so easily have fallen into the category of, Where Are They Now...?"

Producer Rick Rubin has played an integral part in shaping the Chili Peppers sound, having worked on every one of your records since the classic BloodSugarSexMagik, released in 1991. How did you first hook up with him?

"Rick actually hoped that we would join his record label, but even when we signed to Warner Bros he still wanted to work with us. The beauty about his style of producing is that he lets you be you; he doesn't try to put a stamp on anything. He has a very organic way of working--you won't find a lot of overdubs on his records--and he wants the personality of the band to shine through. Rick is all about the song and by directing us in a more song-oriented way, he helped us to craft our jam ideas. There was suddenly more space involved in our music. Flea and I played more for the song--with less syncopation and slap--and John became a more melodic guitar player, which in turn inspired Anthony with his vocals. BloodSugar... was the first time that we had done slower songs too, like 'Under The Bridge', and, for me, it's the first record that truly captures the Chili Peppers' sound."

From a drum perspective, what's it been like to work with Rick?

"The drums sound like drums when we record with him; they are natural, simple, powerful, in-your-face, quite dry but really punchy and powerful. There is no room to hide, though, and that is the raw good, and the raw bad, of it!

"Rick and I like a lot of the same guys too--I think Bonham would be his favourite drummer--so we are on the same page, you know? When you set up a kit for recording, the individual components--kick, snare and toms--might sound great by themselves but, as a full kit, they might not mesh together. Both Rick and I like the drums to sound like a 'set'.

"As we recorded BloodSugarSexMagik I knew that I was improving as a player. When I listen to Mother's Milk I can hear my lack of confidence, but on BloodSugar...I was playing more consistently and with better dynamics. I was listening better, playing the songs better and liking the parts that I was coming up with. Rick gives a timeless quality to the records that he works on and I think BloodSugar...still sounds as good today as it did 13 years ago."

BloodSugar...turned out to be such a huge turning point for the Chili Peppers...

"For us it was very satisfying artistically to have commercial success with a record that we were so proud of. Never in a million years did we ever think that the Chili Peppers would sell, be played on the radio, or win a Grammy for 'Give It Away'. We were just happy to be playing our weird, hyper-rock music to more people than had turned up to the previous show!"

You, John, Flea and Anthony all talk about this very special 'chemistry' that exists between the four members of your band.

"When John quit the band in 1993, Flea, Anthony and I tried really hard. We did play some great shows and have some great moments, but it was never the same without John. Playing with Dave Navarro was never bad, it was just different, but after we had recorded One Hot Minute, I really didn't know if the band was going to stay together. There were a lot of personal issues and it wasn't fun anymore.

"John is our X-factor and it felt so right when he rejoined the group and we started writing songs for Californication in Flea's garage. Jamming is the way that this band writes best and having John back, both musically and personally, was very inspiring. It still is. We felt like we'd been given a second chance and are so happy and appreciative, to find ourselves more popular now than ever before."

You grew up in Detroit and started playing drums at seven. Throughout those formative years, you were influenced by a series of great British drummers and their bands...

"Absolutely. Keith Moon, Mitch Mitchell, John Bonham, Ian Paice, Bill Ward, Ginger Baker, Kenney Jones, Roger Taylor...those are the drummers that shaped me and I still love bands like Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Cream, The Small Faces and Queen. I feel very fortunate to have been influenced by the great music of that era--the '70s was a golden time and there was some seriously amazing, ground-breaking, life-changing music produced then."

All of those drummers most definitely have their 'own thing'. How would you describe your particular style of playing?

"I play with a lot of power, with good dynamics and I am confident about what I do behind the drums. I try to be clean, punchy and precise--kind of precise, but I do like to leave some air between notes--and there is also a little bit of a jazz/funk/swing thing going on in there too.

"That's a tough question, actually, because for a long time I honestly didn't think I had my own style. We spoke earlier about how much I felt I improved as a player when we

recorded BloodSugar...and that's true--I was happy with the songs, the sound and the band. But it's probably only in the last five years or so--really since John came back into the group--that I feel that I've been able to put all of the above elements together on a consistent basis in my playing."

Being 'off-duty' from the Chili Peppers has enabled you to take up offers of work from a wide variety of other artists. In particular you've struck up a great friendship and musical partnership with Glenn Hughes, the former bass player with Deep Purple.

"I find working with other artists very rewarding and I first met Glenn in January 2003 when we performed together at Sabian's Drums Along NAMM party. We hit it off immediately; he's a wonderful man, a great singer and a great bass player. Deep Purple's 'Space Truckin' was one of the first records that I tried to play along to. I only made it to the third drum break though!"

"Glenn's music is traditional rock which I love to play; it's where I've come from and we have a real connection because of that. He's also prepared to take chances musically and--like all those great bands from the '70s that I grew up on--enjoys jamming and improvising. These days there's not a lot of improvising on-stage--I think the Chili Peppers are one of the few groups that try to make things different each night with spontaneous interludes."

Talking of Deep Purple, you also have a special rendezvous with the one and only Ian Paice when you visit the UK in June don't you?

"I am so excited to be doing a drum show with Ian--it's an honour! I have to pinch myself because I've had the most amazing run of playing with legendary musicians recently. The other night I found myself playing 'God Save The Queen' with Lemmy from Motorhead, at a show organised by Dave Navarro. How cool is that?"

You also made a special guest appearance at this year's Superbowl festivities, where you shared the stage with Willie Nelson, Sammy Hagar, Ted Nugent, Jam Master Jay, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry from Aerosmith, and Toby Keith. What an unusual line-up!

"Oh yeah--that was a pretty interesting combination of people!

"Seriously though, I'm so lucky that a lot of older musicians--people that are my heroes--like what our band does. I am always shocked and flattered when I get asked to play with these people that I grew up idolising. And when guys like Steven Tyler from Aerosmith, or Brian May from Queen, thank me for playing with them, I'm like, 'Dude, are you kidding?'"

Tell us about the day you received an unexpected call from Rick Rubin, asking for your help on a country record he was producing...

"My dad was a big fan of country music and was always playing it around the house when I was a kid. At the time I didn't like it--why would I? It was my parents' music! Anyway, Rick happened to be working with Johnny Cash, one of my dad's favourite artists, and had this idea for Flea and I to play on some of the songs. When Rick called to see if I'd be interested, I almost dropped the phone. Johnny Cash? Are you serious? Awesome! My older brother, Brad, who plays guitar, happened to be in town at that time so I rang and left a message for him to meet me at the studio. I hadn't told him what I was doing there and when he walked in, he found me talking to Johnny Cash. He almost fell over! Johnny was the nicest guy and playing with him was very special. The music world lost another legend when he died last year."

Your Chili Peppers cohort, John Frusciante, also asked you to appear on his new solo record, *Shadows Collide With People*. Did you have the opportunity to do your own thing, or did John have a clear idea of how he wanted the drums to sound?

"It was very different to how we work together in the Chili Peppers, because he and Josh (Klinghoffer) had all the drum parts worked out already. I was just the hired help on that occasion! But I was very happy to be able to do it and John is obviously comfortable working with me. Again, it comes back to that special chemistry."

As a musician, you certainly sound very content and positive about the way things are going for you at the moment?

"I feel incredibly lucky. I'm in a very rewarding position with the Chili Peppers and I'm able to do everything I want with the band. I'm also fortunate enough to receive some exciting invitations to play with other incredible musicians. I have the opportunity to play with other drummers too--which is always fun--and I genuinely love doing clinics. If I'd had the chance to go and see one of my favourite drummers playing and answering questions when I was growing up, I'd have jumped and the chance."

"I do still genuinely love playing my instrument, making music, being creative and facing new challenges. Musically and artistically I am very fulfilled, but I still want to keep doing it, you know? All four of us are very excited about the new Chili Peppers material and there is still so much good, positive energy coming from our group, which is awesome. After all, just look at The Rolling Stones--they're still going strong and they've got 20 years on us!"