

Mojo : Hi Jack Mojo (Juillet 2004)

Anthony Kiedis's house, an expanse of glass and whiteness, is right on top of the Hollywood Hills. Walk down the steps into the vast white glass-walled entrance hall and your eyes are drawn to the terrace, where the perfect blue water of a rimless "infinity pool" stretches out into a perfect blue Los Angeles sky. Inside, the walls are hung with photographs, a mix of old Hollywood and contemporary black and whites: Marilyn Monroe; a blurr-faced PJ Harvey; the proprietor with Buster, his dog. Those last two are right now padding about the kitchen, another vast, glass-walled white room, whose surfaces heave with jars of vitamins and supplements.

A cup of tea is offered--a long, intricate operation involving a glass jug of leaves, a plunger, and milk that Kiedis makes himself by grinding cashew nuts and blending them with filtered spring water. Most rock stars would find drinking a tea bag labour-intensive, but Kiedis is as zealous about his healthy lifestyle as he was about his mid-'80s one. The one that revolved around scoring heroin.

Listening to a man whose skin literally glows with wellness telling tales of flea-pits and crack dens and the various Hollywood squats that for a long time he and his band called home has a similar surreality to watching a safari-suited John Lydon on I'm A Celebrity--Get me Out Of Here! gossiping with Jenny Bond.

"John Lydon," Kiedis is saying, "once made a great stab at poaching Flea for Public Image." Nearly got him too. "And Malcolm McLaren tried to poach the whole band. He sat down with us, watched us rehearse, and then he said, "OK, here's the plan, guys. We're going to simplify the music completely so it's just basic, old school, simple three-chord rock'n'roll and we'll have Anthony be the focus of attention and you guys will be the back-up band doing this surf punk thing.' At which point Flea keeled over and passed out. It could have been what we had smoked--we were very dysfunctional at that point--but I think it was more what McLaren said."

This was 1985, soon after the band Kiedis calls the Red Hots and everyone else calls the Chili Peppers ("Red Hot is a nicer name--stronger, less vegetable") released their second album, Freaky Styley. Produced by George Clinton of Parliament/Funkadelic, it flew off the shelves now a jot quicker than their 1984 debut, produced by Gang Of Four's Andy Gill, did. Too funky to be metal, too young to be punk, the band who, by current reckoning are one to the top three biggest in the world were for much of the '80s, in music industry terms, several blocks south of nowhere.

In Silverlake, several blocks east of the specific somewhere that is Holywood, Flea ponders his band's early years on an LA music scene overflowing with poodle cuts and umlauts. Slighter than he appears in pictures, he looks something like a Barnardo's home Chet Baker.

"We were so removed from that Motley Crue scene," he says. "I didn't know who they were, I never went to any of their shows. I'd see their pictures in magazines, with all the funny hair and stuff, and laugh. It was a different world. We came from punk rock, played punk rock places like the Cathay de Grande, and aspired to be cool enough to hang out with bands like X and The Blasters, who were like senior members of that scene. But we did our own thing."

A thing that got the Chili Peppers pegged as a 'California surfer party wildmen' band. While the Chilis, argues Flea, always considered themselves "an art band". "We'd make what we thought was a beautiful piece of art," sighs the bassist, "and then we'd whip out our dicks--because we were drunk or we thought it was a good look or we didn't really care--and that would take over everything."

No band in history has been so overshadowed by their own genitalia. Then there's the rest of the baggage: the drug deaths, the tattoos, the dressing up as giant lightbulbs.

Their entry in Virgin Encyclopaedia Of Popular Music hardly even mentions music, beyond crediting their dubious influence on Extreme and Limp Bizkit. But there are other views.

"From a musicianship standpoint, the Chili Peppers are untouchable," insists Rick Rubin. "Flea is the best bass player in the world, Chad's an incredible drummer, and John Frusciante is one of the handful of best guitar players. Bono once told me, 'We have a great sound but we're nowhere near as good a band as the Chili Peppers.'"

When Rubin needed a rhythm section for Johnny Cash, he hired Flea and Chili's drummer Chad Smith. John Frusciante, who played the guitar solo on Personal Jesus, also got the job of arranging, singing and playing a less Depeche Mode-y version for Cash to follow. The long list of Chili side projects ranges from John Fogerty to Jane's Addiction, LL Cool J to PJ Harvey, Tricky to Shakira, Joshua Redman to James Chance. They've been on tribute albums to The Germs, the Ramones and John Lennon; Flea and Frusciante had a Joy Division tribute band; and they've written and recorded a tribute song to Fela Kuti. It's called Fela's Cock.

Rick Rubin: "If you go back to the beginnings of the band and what they represented, no one would imagine that they would be where they are today. In the past it always had more to do with other things than the breadth and depth of their material. But now they're really primarily a songwriting band--although they also happen to be better players than probably just about any other band there is alive today."

When the Chili Peppers started 21 years ago they were, remarkably enough, press darlings. "How we started out," says Flea, "was a friend of ours had this club, the Rhythm Lounge. He said 'Why don't you get one song together?' After that show there were lines around the block. We opened up for some really great bands before we ever made an album--The Bad Brains, The Minutemen--and it sort of became the in-thing to see us."

Driving west along Hollywood Boulevard in Flea's jeep--early Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds on the CD player, Fela Kuti and The Beatles' Anthology in the glove compartment--we pass by Vine Street, where the modernist record store that is Capitol Tower still houses the Chili's first label, EMI. At Wilton we get stuck in a tailback caused by a movie premiere at Mann's Chinese Theatre. "We used to live there," indicates Flea. "The 'Wilton Hilton'--with a heroin dealer and another guy who I was originally trying to start a band with. We had a bunch of places where we didn't pay rent and stayed till they kicked us out. The most interesting was probably the Land of Lee. A serious crack-dealing house. The day we moved in they all started pelting us with rocks and bottles. We had to escape from the house--or into it--the whole time. Eventually our cat had kittens and they started shitting on the floor and no one wanted to clean it up. After about three weeks you just couldn't live there any more, so we moved. The 'Wilton Hilton' was there we started the Chili Peppers."

The line-up--Flea and Kiedis, guitarist Hillel Slovak and drummer Jack Irons--had been friends at Fairfax High (whose graduates include Phil Spector and Slash and whose gym was used to shoot Nirvana's Smells Like Teen Spirit video). Aged 11, Kiedis had moved to Hollywood with his B-movie actor father Blackie Dammett, from Grand Rapids, Michigan. At the same time Michael Balzary (Flea), a young Australian rumpet prodigy, arrived with his mother and stepfather, an alcoholic jazz musician. Slovak's family had moved to LA from Israel when Hillel was five. Irons was the only native Californian.

Slovak and Irons, who knew each other from junior high, were the first to form a band, Chain Reaction. When Flea joined ("I was set on becoming a jazz musician but then I became friends with Hillel and he said, 'I don't like our bass player, why don't you start to play bass?'"") it became Anthym, which in turn morphed into What Is This. Kiedis was more interested in acting--he got the part of Sylvester Stallone's son in F.I.S.T., But the four had a non-musical group together called Los Faces, a private club where they

discussed music, talked about "silly stuff in funny voices", and gave each other the kind of paternal support they didn't get at home.

Flea: "There's that time when you're coming into our sexuality and you have to deal with all those things that make you become a man, and our father is supposed to walk you through this thing. We--Hillel and me particularly--didn't have that."

Looking back at it, I think we looked to each other for it. I always looked up to Hillel. When I first started playing rock music he was my mentor, because I didn't know anything, I only listened to jazz. Hillel had a real sense of cool--coolest hair, coolest clothes, a rock star arrogance--which I loved."

The first song the foursome wrote was called Out Of The Way.

Flea: "The bass line was a total rip off of a song by Defunkt, a band we were into. And Anthony had been to see Grandmaster Flash and was totally blown away. He said, 'I can rap,' and started rapping one of his poems. That was it."

When the band now called Red Hot Chili Peppers were offered a record deal six months later, on the strength of their live performances, they had just five original songs to their name. Moreover, with What Is This also signed to MCA, Slovak and Irons were contractually barred from playing, so Flea and Kiedis brought in guitarist Jack Sherman (from Captain Beefheart's band) and drummer Cliff Martinez (The Weirdos). It wasn't a great way to start.

Flea: "The album was stiff and didn't groove. It was a big mistake. I don't blame (producer) Andy Gill--Gang Of Four were one of my favourite bands--but I used to."

Flea reportedly made his feelings known by presenting Gill with a turd in a pizza box..."What actually happened is, I said (yells), I gotta take a shit! and Andy Gill goes (posh English accent), Bring it back for me, will you? So I shat on a pizza box top and stuck it on the mixing board. I don't think he was too pleased. We weren't getting along, but I think we were pretty hard to get along with. There were so many situations where we thought we were funny and shocking and we were just disrespectful and obnoxious."

By Freaky Styley, Flea had persuaded Slovak to return.

Kiedis: "Praise the Lord! The next thing you know we were rehearsing and we got all this music. Our A&R man said, 'You can have anyone in the world you want to produce.' and we said, George Clinton. This whole kind of fairytale experience was unfolding."

Suddenly, the Red Hot Chili Peppers were in a studio with Fred Wesley and Maceo Parker, paying songs by Sly Stone and The Meters.

Kiedis: "(Clinton) was insane and a bit dysfunctional, but he was so smart and so creative and so loving and non-judgemental. He wasn't like the super-genius who was above us, he was the great super-genius that was right in there teaching and cheerleading and pushing and being part of the band."

The album, like its predecessor, flopped. The record company, strangely, didn't seem too bothered. "We were beneath the radar," is Kiedis's theory. "Every now and then it would be, 'Who are these guys walking around here?' 'They're on your label.' 'They are?' EMI were really into Kajagoogoo and that glam metal band, Hanoi Rocks."

In one way the label's ambivalence proved a blessing.

"I think if we were financially successful in the beginning," says Kiedis, "we would have simply died. I ran out of money after Freaky Styley, a time when I was definitely about to do myself in."

Kiedis and Slovak were on a downward spiral of heroin use, but it was Slovak who died. The Uplift Mofo Party Play (1987) would be the only Chili Peppers album to feature the complete original line-up, since Jack Irons had also briefly returned. The timing, on a career level, wasn't great. A few months before the 26-year-old Slovak OD'd, EMI had detected a buzz around the album and packed the band off on a UK/European Promo tour. They rush-released an EP, *Abbey Road*, named for the cover picture taken by British photographer Chris Clunn of the re-enactment of The Beatles' zebra crossing shot, naked bar those now-famous socks.

Flea: "Hillel's death was just devastating. I was so shocked when it happened, I just fell on the floor, gasping for air. As we started getting older and drugs became more and more prevalent, Hillel started having a deep sadness to him. I didn't really know how to deal with that sadness and I don't think he knew how to deal with it."

Irons blamed the band for what happened. Locking himself in his house, refusing to take calls, he suffered a mental breakdown and was institutionalised.

Kiedis: "I was just hanging on by a thread at that point, I had been so demolished by drug use. For weeks after Hillel died I kept getting out of my mind. Then a month later I got sober. It was such a life-altering loss. And a horrible disfiguring of our band dynamic."

But they persevered. DeWayne 'Blackbyrd' McKnight--the former P-Funk guitarist who stood in briefly for Slovak when the band sacked him in a previous spat over drugs--and ex-Dead Kennedys drummer DH Peligro were hired. Then fired. Peligro was first to go. Flea and Kiedis contacted 30 drummers and started auditioning. Halfway between the music school that Flea helps fund and Anthony Kiedis's place, a narrow turning off the road to the Hollywood sign leads to another hilltop house.

This time a grand old Spanish villa of the sort once favoured by movie stars. Its previous owner, in fact, was Cary Grant. There's a framed B&W of him on the wall, posing with the current owner--the tall man in a Mickey Mouse T-Shirt and backwards baseball cap who at this moment is warmly shaking MOJO's hand and offering drinks.

"Not bad, is it?" Chad Smith smiles, showing us around. "For God's sake, it's just a rock band. I'm so fucking lucky."

Smith came to LA from Detroit in 1988 to go to music school, when he heard about the Chili Peppers auditions. "I thought, Oh, yeah, the guys with the socks on their dicks."

Smith's appearance, as much as his musical tastes (Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Queen), seemed more suited to the heavy rock bands that still held sway in Los Angeles (Guns N'Roses clones now more than wannabe Motley Crues). "I had a mullet--more a new wavy kind of poodle cut--and they said, 'Will you shave your head?' Fuck you, you shave yours. And they're, 'He's fucking punk rock, telling us to fuck off.' A month later I was taking pictures for a magazine with a sock on my dick so it was, I guess I'm in the band."

Shortly before his departure, Peligro had introduced Flea and Kiedis to a young guitarist who was auditioning for Thelonus Monster. "The greatest band out of LA that never was," Kiedis calls them, "punk rock but with a psychedelic heart and too good and too insane to maintain anything long enough for anyone to hear about them." He knew the band well. Back in '84, when Flea accidentally set fire to the crack house the Chilis then inhabited, the band's frontman, Bob Forrest, let them live with him (the place was emptier than usual, his wife having just left). It was Forrest's idea that the Chili Peppers cover Hank Williams on their first LP.

The guitar player was an 18-year-old unknown named John Frusciante, a music obsessive whose current favourite band was the Chili Peppers. "I had played before with Flea a couple of times but he wouldn't give me a chance to audition and hired Blackbyrd. But it wasn't working out. He saw me audition for Thelonious Monster and went back to Anthony and said, 'That guy's got to be in the Chili Peppers.' They asked me if I wanted the job and I said, Yes, more than anything in the world. That night they fired Blackbyrd and hired me.

In 2004, Frusciante looks better than he has in a long time, the long hair and hobo beard he modelled on his late '90s return to the Chili fold substituted with a short crop and clean-shaven face. His glasses make him look bookish, and overall he appears monk-like, cloistered. He has a sweet, sad smile, an impressive set of dentures, and arms so scarred they look like someone tried to melt them with a blowtorch. Enthusiastic and articulate, he describes a childhood in New York: Italian grandfather and great-grandfather playing fiddle and madolin in restaurants; his father, a former classical pianist, buying him a guitar: then, when his parents' marriage broke up, a move to California. He says that since he was four years old there were voices in his head telling him he would be a musician. When he first heard LA punk at the age of 10, he knew they were telling the truth.

"Before that I was into Kiss, Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith. I had deeply moving experiences with that music, but still it was something that everybody else was into. But punk felt specifically aimed at me. It was very real all of a sudden and music was not just this thing done by these gods. I'd read about Darby Crash jumping off Santa Monica pier on 10 hits of acid, and the pier was a place I saw all the time, so I felt he could be somebody I could know. And the music was simple enough for me to be able to imagine playing."

By age 16 he could play the guitar solos on every one of Frank Zappa's albums. Which is how, the year before he joined the Chili Peppers, he came to audition for Zappa's band.

"I don't know if this is a nice thing to print but he was very grumpy. I watched the way that he was dealing with people, ignoring people. At that point I was doing cocaine--it was a part of my life I really liked--and I knew about his attitude to that. So I was sitting there thinking, Do you want to be a rock star and write your own songs and draw all the girls and things like that, or do you want to be in Frank Zappa's band where you'll be told what to do all the time, not allowed to take drugs, and it's kind of a square band so there's not going to be a lot of girls at the shows? And I thought, Nah, and I walked out. I wanted to be in a band like the Chili Peppers."

Frusciante, who knew every Slovak guitar part by heart, hit the sessions from Mother's Milk (1989) running. The results, according to Smith, were "good, but like a new band trying to feel each other out." Still, they had an unexpected UK Top 30 hit with the single Taste The Pain, and the exposure they had from MTV for their invigorating cover of Stevie Wonder's Higher Ground sent their last album for EMI into the lower reaches of the US charts.

There were setbacks. Flea and Smith were arrested on charges of battery and sexual harassment, a continuing embarrassment to an older and much wiser band. Kiedis was dabbling with heroin again. Yet a lucrative commercial with Andre Agassi for Nike and a nice new record deal with Warner Bros redressed the balance. The Chilis told their new label they wanted Rick Rubin to produce them.

Kiedis: "That wasn't our first encounter with Rick. After Freaky Styley he came to watch us rehearse, with a couple of Beastie Boys. It was a really dysfunctional time for us and were fighting and kind of toxic-looking. I think we just scared the shit out of him because he was 'Ah, let's go now.'"

Rubin: "I remember it felt really unhealthy. There was a real dark cloud hanging over them and I was just anxious to get out. But the whole energy of the band had changed. I had seen them play at the Greek Theatre and it blew m mind. Their connection with the audience was so incredible. And, spending time with them, I saw the potential for the band to take things further musically than they had in the past. I felt like they had always seen themselves in a little box--"funk band with rap-style vocals"--and they were such great musicians that it seemed limited."

Flea: "When we made BloodSugar we spent a lot of time jamming--every day, for hours and hours. I remember during that time. Anthony went off and made a movie, and for a long time it was just me, John and Chad, and we'd just go in there and play. Me and John were hitting the bong and just rocked and grooved forever. It was the first time we went in to make a record where it wasn't this feeling of being sort of intimidated by what was going to happen."

The album was recorded in an old mansion in the Hollywood Hills that Warners executive Lenny Waronker rented for the band. Recalls Kiedis, "It wa huge and empty and had been owned by bootlegging gangsters, all these old Hollywood relics from the '30s. Rick Rubin loved it. After we finished the album he bought it."

Rubin: "It's a magical, haunted mansion. All the artists who have worked there since--the Chili Peppers were the first--have experienced some kind of other-worldly phenomenon in that house."

Supernaturally assisted it may have been, but BloodSugarSexMagic was a revelation. Give It Away was a steamy rap jam, Under The Bridge a glaringly beautiful song. And reaffirming the band's impeccable taste, They're Red Hot was an acoustic skiffle take on the Robert Johnson song.

Flea: "That was a magical moment of the recording, because we recorded it at two or three in the morning, outside, out on top of Laurel Canyon, and there were stars, and the sound of cars going by and we were just rocking."

Frusciante: "My programme during BloodSugar was I would wake up and listen to Captain Beefheart every morning and I would go to sleep listening to Robert Johnson every night."

The album's defining song is the heroin ballad Under The Bridge, which features Frusciante's mum and two of her friends from church on backing vocals.

Rubin: "I was at Anthony's house, looking through notebooks of his lyrics and poems. I found that song and I asked him what it was and he said, 'Oh, that's not really for the Chili Peppers.' And I said, Well, sing it to me, tell me how it goes. I remember him bringing it in to the band and being really embarrassed. But once he sang it, they loved it. It was a really personal, revelatory, guts-spilling song." BloodSugar was the Chili Peppers' big breakthrough, US Number 2; three million sold. A remarkable achievement considering that in 1991 grunge had taken over from glam metal on American radio and MTV. It should have been the highpoint of the Chili Peppers' career, it wasn't.

Smith: "Everyone was digging our music, and then we went out on tour and John started getting disillusioned with the whole thing, hating all the things that Anthony--who he used to follow around everywhere like a big brother--was embracing. It was not fun. We struggled with that tour for months--in the States and then Europe--but it was just disintegrating. I used to get kind of pissed off with him, like, What the funk's wrong with you, man?"

Frusciante: "I was a bumner in the band because I made everybody feel bad about being successful and living the life of a rock star. When I quit, they were free to do that, and I think it was a lot lighter feeling, better for everybody, not to have this heavy guy with you all the time."

Kiedis: "It was really a gut-wrenching time. John just went further and further into his own space and, as we started touring, it was really maddening for me. And I was a bit of an asshole at that time in my life anyways; I had some control issues, and I wanted everyone to have as much fun as I was having, which is absurd. But John was enjoying it less and less and Flea was somewhere in the middle, having to deal with the tension. The next conversation was, Let's get another guitar player."

There followed a few--Zander Schloss (1992); Arik Marshall (1992); Jesse Tobias (1993)- before they settled in 1993 on Dave Navarro, ex-Jane's Addiction. Navarro, who had declined their invitation to play with them at the Lollapalooza festival in 1992, made his Chili Pepper debut at the Woodstock II festival in '94. Dressed as a lightbulb.

Kiedis: "It looked great. But it was daunting for Dave. With a lightbulb on your head you can't see the frets, and if you're in a new band you want to see what you're playing. Plus it's hard to look cool with a lightbulb on your head."

For BloodSugar's follow-up One Hot Minute, the band went to Hawaii to write, then returned to LA to record with Rubin.

Rubin: "It was a very difficult time for the band and a very difficult album to make." Apart from losing Frusciante, Kiedis's drug problems had resurfaced, and Flea's emotional state, already upset by the drugs death of his friend River Phoenix, wasn't helped by trying to make an album with little co-operation from the lead singer or, for that matter, the guitarist. "It took a very long time and was very unfocused, even though there were some great songs. Dave Navarro was the only guitar player who has ever been in the Chili Peppers who had no relation to the band's former sound, had never been a disciple of Hillel as a guitar player and really came in with his own trip."

Kiedis was AWOL. Navarro wouldn't jam. Flea was left to write the bulk of the album on guitar, an instrument he didn't play. Confusingly, he sought solace in the re-formed Jane's Addiction, where he observed how natural Navarro seemed in his native environment. An idea kindling in his mind, Flea paid a visit to John Frusciante.

Frusciante: "I had so many years of terrible, terrible..." He breaks down. "I'm sorry," he says, turning the tape recorder off and drying his eyes. "Sometimes I get into situations of just being so overwhelmed by what I've been through, so many years of regretting everything, all the things I could have done when I was 22 years old..." The tape is back on. "But I was totally incapable of it. I had just so many mental problems. It wasn't until I was 28 that my brain actually felt like a spacious place. When I was 18, 19, 22, my brain was just clogged all the time--non-stop voices. I couldn't figure out what was going on. There was a lot of confusion inside me, this flood of voices, often contradicting each other, often telling me stuff that would happen in the future and then it would happen, voices insulting me, telling me what to do."

"I might have made things a bit more balanced if my head had been a little clearer, but it wasn't with the amount of pot I smoked--24 hours a day by the time I was 20. I had this feeling that there was something else I needed to do for myself on the inside that had nothing to do with my outward presentation to the world, so playing live in the Chili Peppers was making me severely depressed. If I had quit at the end of BloodSugar, I think I could have gone through this stuff easier, without becoming a drug addict. But by the time I did leave, hard drugs were the only way I could be happy enough to live and not just be the most hopeless person who can't even listen to music and is about to die. I took a clear-cut decision that I was going to be a drug addict."

Five years later, Frusciante checked what was left of him (teeth rotted out, ravaged veins, arms covered with cigarette buns and scars) into a hospital to clean up.

Flea: "We had called Dave and said, It's not really working out. I had stayed in touch with John off and on, and there was a period when I would try to hint to him and Anthony about accepting the other one, and both of them were like, 'Nrrrr.'

But when John was in the hospital getting off drugs, Anthony visited him and they started becoming friends again. I said, Anthony, maybe I should go and feel John out about coming back, and he said, 'OK'.

"I went over to John's house and he just started sobbing and said he wanted to do it. I was dead set on making a solo record at that time--I had written all these songs, all sensitive guitar and me singing--and I went off to Costa Rica for 10 days just to get away. The day I came back I was at my house and the doorbell rang. John and Anthony were standing there. John was holding a guitar in the air, his face all lit up--because he hadn't had a guitar; he'd pawned them all--and Anthony was with him, waving, a giant smile on his face. It was such an incredible sight, I'll never forget it. So incredible I thought, Fuck the solo record, it's time to do this."

Kiedis: "We set up and practised in Flea's garage, behind his house. From the second they plugged in, it was the perfect fit. I became just giddy with joy really, hearing that combination of musicians playing together. It was kind of miraculous."

There were a few more hurdles to overcome before recording 1999's Californication. Both Smith and Kiedis had been involved in separate motorcycle accidents. Smith recovered quicker and put a side band together with Dave Navarro called Spread. Kiedis took off--for Australia, New Zealand and a beach in Thailand--for six months, "To get my mind, body and spirit working together in preparation for something I didn't even know was going to happen." Flea, whose home life was in turmoil, had a nervous breakdown.

Rubin: "They were much less confident making Californication because of what had happened with One Hot Minute, so they were in a mode of wanting to work really hard. And there's just such a really powerful musical plug between John and Flea--they have this kind of psychic connection where they can walk in and both pick up their instruments and start playing, in unison. I can't think of another musical connection I've seen that's as strong as theirs. And I think the fact that John was back really put wind in the band's sails."

Frusciante: "The music I was listening to at that time constantly was Fugazi, Joy Division, the Ramones and The Cure. The song Californication was very influenced by Carnage Visors, a 30-minute instrumental B-side The Cure made."

Flea: "Californication is the best record the Chili Peppers have ever made." It sold 15 million copies.

Rubin: "All of which gave them a tremendous amount of confidence when it came to the next album, John had lots of musical ideas--he wanted to try horns, synthesizers, a lot of strings. I would say it's a more musically mature album, probably the deepest of them all."

Critics noted By The Way's intricate chord changes and harmonies, its range of instrumental textures from bubblegum to mariachi, and the nods to The Beach Boys and The Beatles. Frusciante was making up for lost time. Recording at the Chateau Marmont, the Sunset Boulevard hotel where Frusciante had spent a portion of his Lost Years, the guitarist was given free rein to innovate.

Frusciante: "Before the record started, me and my friend Josh (Klinghoffer, with whom he has an experimental side band, Ataxia) had been getting together with a Complete Beatles score book and learned the chords and harmonies to every song. This continued when we were making the Chili Peppers album--I'd rehearse during the day from two to six, then go home, put on a movie, take a nap, then Josh would come over at nine and we'd stay up till seven in the morning, playing Beatles songs and singing our heads off. I was learning to harmonise. Anthony and I had agreed earlier that we'd like to make the backing vocals a bigger part of the music. Towards the end of the record I started listening to Pet Sounds constantly.

Kiedis: "Californication, because we were starting afresh, was like being back at album number one again. So By The Way was our sophomore effort. Hopefully next time it will take another complete turn--whether for complexity or simplicity--but hopefully in some way for the better."

They started recording tracks for the new album last summer, although it's too early--reckons Rick Rubin--to tell which way it's going to go. They'll restart when they get back from this summer's imperial megatour...

"...with James Brown," Flea grins, showing the gap in his teeth. The Chilis bassist comes over all misty-eyed when talking about the Godfather of Soul. He describes getting thrown off the side of the stage on the previous occasion his band shared a bill with Brown ("they didn't believe I was in the band") and getting growled at by the great man when he stuck his head into his backstage tent.

In fact, it's fair to say that each of the Chili Peppers has retained his adolescent fandom. It's an engaging quality you don't always see in veteran bands. When, as a final question before going home, MOJO asks each of them to define the band's place in rock history, most tackle it with a list of names of artists they find historic--from the Clash to Queen and everything in between--and as for their own assets, toss in a few words like "integrity" (Flea), "chemistry" (Frusciante), "the punk-funk-rock thing" (Smith). All of them mention their longevity.

"As time has gone by, and it's 21 years, we've just gotten better in public," reflects Flea. "Learned from our mistakes and held onto the things that are good. There aren't a lot of bands who have done that."

"I don't think you'll know where we fit yet," concludes Anthony, before showing us to the door, "because we keep sliding around. We keep changing. And we're not done yet."