

Red Hot Chili Peppers- Confessions Of Sir Psycho

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You might not even notice the photograph if Anthony Kiedis hadn't pointed it out, surrounded as it is by dozens of others. But on closer inspection, the old black-and-white image that graces one wall of the singer's Hollywood Hills, Calif., home has a haunting, timeless quality that sets it apart. A trio of teen-age boys decked out in surf-punk gear, eyes lit by possibility and all-for-one, one-for-all camaraderie: Kiedis, the Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea and the late Hillel Slovak, the Peppers' first guitarist, captured in mid-goof-off by a Hollywood street photographer more than a decade ago. It's difficult to look at the photograph without imagining that the spirit that lent it such poignant resonance is guarding the house and all who pass through its doors.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers have weathered numerous traumas since that photograph was taken - Slovak's death by heroin overdose in 1988; Kiedis' struggle to overcome his own heroin addiction; and the abrupt departure of guitarist John Frusciante in 1992 during the most successful year in the band's history - but always, through a career spanning 11 years, six albums and one EP, they've persevered. Last year, the Red Hot Chili Peppers found themselves facing yet another hurdle. During early attempts to write songs for a new album with guitarist Arik Marshall - who had stepped in just prior to the Chili Pepper's Lollapalooza '92 outing to pinch-hit for the departed Frusciante - it became apparent that, as Kiedis puts it, "the emotional connection you need with a new person in your band" wasn't there. Marshall left the band, and after scouring the ranks of their peers in a fruitless search to replace him - a process that included numerous pleading phone calls to former Jane's Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro - the Peppers resorted to placing a want ad in the L.A. Weekly. The ad drew 5,000 calls the first day it ran, but few of the eager auditionees came close to fitting the bill. "We were looking for very specific, cosmic characteristics," says Kiedis, "and they just weren't presenting themselves. Everything became very jumbled and confused, and we were losing sight of what we were doing as a band."

Eventually, they settled on an unknown guitarist named Jesse Tobias. Tobias was in a newly signed band when he got the invitation to join the Chili Peppers; he quit his band and was welcomed into the Peppers' fold with considerable media fanfare. He didn't have much time to bask in the glory of his new gig, though: after only a month, he was issued a pink slip and replaced with the suddenly available Navarro. Kiedis says the Chili Peppers felt "awful" about ousting Tobias after he'd quit his other band but maintains that the decision would have been made regardless of Navarro.

"Though it may seem like a case of Dave uprooting Jesse, it wasn't exactly like that," says Kiedis. "The discontentment had already planted itself. We really like Jesse's playing, but it just didn't develop into the musical camaraderie that we were used to. Flea didn't feel right about it, and the fate of this band relies on Flea having a sense of musical contentment with the guitar player. So it had already been decided - in everyone's minds, if not verbally."

Chances are none of the Peppers, are suffering sleepless nights over thoughts of the jilted Tobias. Now, a few weeks into February, the band appears to be firing on all cylinders again. Rick Rubin, who produced the band's 1991 megahit, Blood Sugar Sex Magik, is lined up to produce its next record, and in two days, the Chili Peppers leave for Hawaii, where, free of distractions save the welcome variety, they'll hole up in a house together and begin preproduction.

Yesterday, over a pot of strong coffee and numerous bottles of Evian, Kiedis held forth on all manner of topics. Tonight, he has some loose ends to tie up before the trip, but he's offered a quick tour of his house before he moves on to other business. Kiedis' dad, a handsome, outgoing actor and writer who goes by the stage name Blackie Dammett, is visiting from Michigan. Moving through the house, they point out various treasures: the aforementioned photo; an original Dali photograph; half a dozen paintings by Robert Williams; a wrought-iron stair railing made by a Hungarian blacksmith; a rather imposing stone fireplace crafted in the shape of a woman's body, complete with purple glass nipples; a wooden angel who smiles serenely down from the ceiling in the Kiedis boudoir. ("She's supposed to safeguard those who sleep beneath her," says Kiedis.)

The two walk onto a terrace that offers a glorious, moonlit view of Griffith Park. Kiedis disappears to change his shirt for dinner, leaving his father to gaze out over the hills.

"Anthony was 2 when we came out here, his mom and me and him in our little Corvair with the U-Haul trailer," says Dammett. "We got divorced, and he went back to Michigan with his mom, but he came to visit every summer, and when he was 11, he moved out here with me. Back then, I was working with Alice Cooper and John Lennon, and I was quite the crazy raniac. So he grew up in kind of a wild and hectic environment. I always knew he'd do great things."

"The family, we feel funny about all the controversy, this thing about [U.S. Health and Human Services secretary] Donna Shalala saying he was a bad spokesperson for AIDS," Dammett says. "She doesn't know anything about him."

In person, the 31-year-old Kiedis does seem markedly different from his stage persona as a punk bonehead with raging hormones. In conversation, the singer is sincere almost to the point of somberness; he chooses his words carefully, tossing out two or three before settling on one with just the right poetic feel, as if he likes to imbue everything in his orbit with a sense of ceremony. After a few hours with him, it's difficult to reconcile Kiedis with the fellow who's made a career out of strutting around with a tube sock on his willie.

"He's really a very conscientious, kind, altruistic person," Dammett says, as eager as the next father to brag about his kids. "Do you know what he did on Thanksgiving? He brought meals to the homeless people downtown, 50 of them or something. With little place mats that he designed and signed and everything. He does that kind of stuff all the time, but he'd never tell you about it. And did he tell you he bought me a house? It's a mansion, practically. Six and a half acres on the side of the lake

in Michigan."

Kiedis reappears, bringing the tattling session to an abrupt halt. He and his father work their way back downstairs, stopping in the kitchen to collect jackets and car keys. It's interesting to watch the interplay between them; they seem more like siblings than father and son.

Kiedis waves an arm toward his refrigerator, the surface of which is almost entirely covered with stickers and photos, mementos of his travels. "That's the senior picture of my girlfriend right there," he says, pointing out a high school graduation photo of a pretty blonde.

Senior picture? Oh? How long ago was that taken?

Opening his mouth to answer, then stopping short, Kiedis looks much like a hare caught in the headlights. What with all the time he spent yesterday deflecting questions about his Don Juan image, it won't do to blab to the journalist that his main squeeze is fresh out of high school.

Kiedis sneaks a glance at Dammett, trapped. For an instant, their eyes lock in a priceless display of hand-in-the-cookie-jar telepathy. The question hangs in the air a moment before Kiedis decides to bite the bullet and fess up.

"It's pretty recent," Kiedis admits a tad sheepishly, and then father and son burst out laughing.

It's been a year and a half since Lollapalooza '92. What have you guys been doing besides auditioning guitar players?

A lot of farting around. After we finished Lollapalooza, we went to Australia and to New Zealand, which was the true end of our touring for Blood Sugar Sex Magik. Then everyone else went back to L.A., and I met my friend Hank Schiffmacher on the west coast of Borneo, which is one of the largest remaining rain forests in the world. We were going to cross the entire island. And that turned into the most harrowing, semiunpleasant test of survival that I've ever subjected myself to.

How so?

Well, I had these great images of myself swinging from vines and playing in the jungle and finding orangutans and dancing among exotic flowers. But it turned into more of a Vietnam experience. Everyone got brutally ill. At night, we would sleep in these incredibly uncomfortable, wet, seething-with-jungle-life conditions. The first night in the jungle, we weren't using our mosquito netting, and I woke up with this incredibly painful buzzing and humming inside my brain. I woke up Hank and said, "Please, look in my ear, my head is vibrating, and I'm going insane." He's got this flashlight, and he's looking in my ear: "No, I see nothing. I see nothing." And then he drops the flashlight and screams, and I feel this animal crawl out of my ear. He said it looked like an oversize jungle roach that had somehow collapsed its body and worked its way into my ear canal and gotten stuck.

Oh, gross

Yeah. So I wasn't having the greatest time. And halfway through, we got lost in these mountains in the middle of Borneo. And when you're a white guy from California, and you've run out of food, and you can't fluidly communicate with your guides, it becomes a source of concern.

How long were you lost?

We were lost for a week. I finally get back to L.A., and it turns out that I'm stricken with dengue fever. It's a very rare fever - like a distant cousin of malaria - and I had to go into the hospital for a week. But I got over the dengue fever and regrouped with the boys in the band. Then Flea and I took a trip to Costa Rica. There were lots of high-adventure traveling activities because we knew we were getting ready to make another record.

To that end, how have things been working out with Dave Navarro?

It's loads of fun. At first, I think we were a little too headstrong about rushing into the act of writing, which wasn't the best way to go about things. We really just had to play without the specific intention of making a record for a while, so things could get natural among the four of us.

When the subject comes up, the general consensus is that it will be either really great or really awkward. His style is so dreamy and wah-wah oriented that it's difficult to imagine him in the Chili Peppers.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers are not married to any style. The only thing we're married to in music is sincerity and honesty. And we respected his style so much that we were completely ready to assimilate everything that he had to offer. We were completely open to anything that would happen.

Have you guys written anything yet?

Yeah, we've come up with a slew of ideas. But our approach is to come up with 87 slews and choose from the slews which to keep and which to lose. Everything we've done so far is really cool to me, and it feels natural and right. But it's hard to express coherently what we've done so far, because we have so much more to do.

Have you ever wondered if maybe part of the problem that you've historically had with guitarists might be that you, Flea and Hillel were such a tight unit that subconsciously nobody's ever going to fill Hillel's shoes?

Subconsciously and consciously, that's very true. Nothing will ever be like Hillel, Flea and Anthony as a trio. That's impossible. That was a point in our lives both musically and personally that will never be repeated, and it's insane to think that it ever would be. But I think we dealt with that realization a long time ago.

What's your relationship like with Flea? Do you argue?

We've been known to have our differences of opinion. But I don't think that's unusual. Any time two people know each other and work together and play together for as long as Flea and I have, the occasional disagreement is just an accepted part of the pie. We've been through so much together that if something were going to come between us, I think it would have happened years ago.

Most of the other bands who had successful records around the time "Blood Sugar Sex Magik" broke -in the so-called alternative boom - are now touring behind new albums. Have you guys felt left out because it took you so long to regroup?

No, because what they do has nothing to do with what we do. That particular clique of bands are all from the same city, and all came to the attention of the music-consuming public at approximately the same time. We've been running our own steady course of affairs, exclusive to anything that they've done. So there really isn't a pocket of other bands that we sort of gauge ourselves by.

Has there ever been ?

There was at a time, but that was more about bands from L.A. There was a time when Fishbone and Jane's Addiction were on the move, and there were even bands before that like the Minutemen that we felt a lot of kinship with. But not anymore. After Jane's Addiction and the Minutemen dissolved, that feeling of being connected because we were from the same city went the same way.

What sort of lifestyle changes have you guys gone through since the success of "Blood Sugar Sex Magik"?

For years, Flea and I roamed around the city not having any idea how we were going to go about eating lunch or dinner. When we first hooked up with our manager, we said, "If you want to manage us, you have to make sure that we eat every day." That was the big thing. We never had money of our own or houses or cars or anything like that. But in the last few years, everything's changed drastically. We made a lot of money, we all bought houses and cars, and we can take care of our families. I just bought my father a house; I take care of my mother; and I take care of my sisters. I put my sisters through college last year. That's a huge change for me, being able to take care of my family and help my friends out if they need any help. That's a strange loss of tension in our lives.

Celebrity also brings a lot of pressure. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you thought you might buckle under the lack of privacy or the demands on your time?

I don't feel that way at all. We've never succumbed to the pressures of management or agents or record companies wanting us to work harder and tour longer and make more records. We know we wouldn't be happy doing that. In order for us to have the juice to make music, we have to live our lives in other ways. We'd be empty if all we ever did was tour and record.

Surely you've had people attempt to put that kind of pressure on your though. How have you managed to avoid bowing to it?

Well, because our ascent was so gradual, we had a lot of time to figure out how we were most comfortable doing what we do. If we'd become tremendously popular after our first record, I think we would've disintegrated years ago. But because it happened over the course of five records, we had a lot of time to figure it out along the way.

What do you think people are expecting from your next record? Do you ever feel hemmed in by the band's image as this gang of sexually belligerent clowns?

The first word I would erase from that description would be belligerent. I don't think our sexuality is belligerent; it's more a free-flowing musical display. And that's only one small part of who we are. If you made a list of every song that we've ever written, maybe 10 percent would be sexually dominated. But I think that's the way the public is. If something's racy, they crave that, and they long to associate celebrities with those characteristics. People lust after provocative incidents. They love to talk about them over breakfast and mull over them while they're driving home from work.

But do you resent the rather one-dimensional perception people seem to have of the band?

I don't care about that. Sometimes people's perceptions could restrict their ability to understand and appreciate what we do. But that's their problem.

Where do you think the more overly sexual of your songs fit in, in an era of AIDS and safe sex?

The correlation between hard-core funk music and sexuality is so undeniable that to write about it and to sing about it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. So we did it, and we still do it. The fact that things are so different today because of the dangerous nature of sexual activity doesn't mean you have to cut out your sexuality. You just have to be more careful and more thoughtful.

Just out of curiosity, have you ever had an AIDS test?

I've been tested five times. I would never, ever want to give anybody I cared about - even someone I didn't care about - something that would kill them. I was tested today.

No way.

I got a negative result back today.

When your manager said you were running errands, that wasn't exactly what came to mind.

I go to a lot of different doctors. I go to an acupuncturist, and I have a homeopathic doctor. And so a lot of times when I'm going in to find out what chemicals are in my body, I'll just say, "Do an HIV test while you're at it." The first one I had was petrifying, I was on pins and needles for days until I found out. The second one was when I started going out with this girl, and her mother was really into finding out that I was OK. And that was a little nerve-racking. But since then, it hasn't been. Since I stopped using intravenous drugs, I'm in a very low-risk group.

APSA you made about condoms was pulled when the powers that be decided you weren't a suitable spokesperson. I imagine you found that fairly insulting.

Well, that's one of those stories where, from my point of view, everybody loses out. This ad agency consigned by the government came to me and said, "Will you do a radio PSA for the use of condoms?" And I said to myself, "Well, that sounds like a very productive and positive thing to do." So they come to our studio, and Flea and Chad [Smith, the Peppers' drummer] and Dave play this sort of swinging jazz groove while I do this spiel about "Here I am wearing my condom when I have sex, every time, not just when it's convenient, not just when my partner thinks of it, but every single time." Which is something that everybody in the band believes in. And the ad agency was very pleased, and the government was very pleased. But then this woman who was in charge of the whole thing finds out that it's me and says, "This guy did something to a girl" - which in reality I did not - and she was very rigid about getting me kicked off the program. The ironic fact was that I never did what it was that I was accused of .

What was it that caused all the uproar?

Five years ago after a show in Virginia, this girl accused me of indecent exposure and sexual battery .I was guilty of the indecent exposure. And I told the judge that I didn't do it with the intention of hurting anybody - it was just a stupid prank. And maybe I learned something from that, which is, you cannot go around taking your dick out, because some people don't like it. But this thing where she claimed that I touched her, I just didn't do. I didn't get near her. We went to court, it was a very conservative county, and they convicted me of both things. It was shocking for me that a court of law could convict you of something you didn't do. But once you get into the court, anything can happen. It's her word against my word, with a bunch of very conservative jurors who I are more likely to believe a girl who's going to college than a rock & roll boy who has a reputation for lewd activities.

You do have a repas a major womanizer.

Like so many millions of other men on this planet, I love women. I love their essence and the way they think and the way they talk and the way they move and the way they feel. I don't think that's terribly unusual. Yes, I have a strong appreciation for women. But that doesn't mean I'm a womanizer.

I'm quoting Chad Smith here: "He's usually on the make. He really fancies himself a connoisseur of women."

Chad probably thought he was giving me a compliment. But I thought that was a very unflattering statement, because it makes me seem like I look at women as objects to be conquered, which I don't.

Have you had many serious relationships with women?

Over the years, yeah.

Can you ever picture yourself settling down and having kids?

Yeah. I love children, and eventually I would love to have a relationship with a child of my own. But up to this point, I haven't felt comfortable enough with myself. I would hate to subject a child to the more insidious elements of my own personality.

You mentioned earlier that children seem really drawn to the Chili Peppers' music.

Yeah. I was toy shopping in New York right before Christmas, and this little girl was tugging on her mom's coat, pointing at me and going, "That's him, that's him." And her mom came running over and said, "Oh, I've just got to thank you, you've made my life so much easier." She said the only way she could get her little girl dressed in the morning was to play our record and sing to her: "Gimme an arm, gimme an arm, gimme an arm now." And she puts her arm in the shirt, and then it's "Gimme your leg, gimme your leg, gimme your leg now." That happens a lot, with kids literally from the age of 1. And to me, the appreciation of a child is the ultimate compliment. Did I tell you we're going on Sesame Street?

Come again?

I've seen Dizzy Gillespie on Sesame Street, and a number of musicians have appeared in sketches. They play music, and the kids gather around, and it's always a really cool thing. For a long time, we've wanted to play Sesame Street, and they weren't too sure about it. But they finally said yes. So as soon as we finish this record, we're gonna do a spot on Sesame Street. That could be the pinnacle of our career.

What were the producers' concern initially? Were they afraid you'd come out in the socks or something?

I think it just took 'em a while to realize that we have an understanding with kids and that kids dig what we do.

How do you feel about kids listening to a song like "Sir Psycho Sexy"?

If parents think their child can't handle the language that I use, then they shouldn't expose their kids to it. That's more up the parents than me.

Your own upbringing was extremely liberal, especially during the time you spent with your dad. I want to talk about that, but first I wanted to ask you about your mom. What's your relationship like with her?

It's very good. When I was growing up, my mother was the perfect picture of unconditional love and worked her ass off to support me for about 10 years. She instilled qualities in me that I'm very grateful for.

What sort of things do you remember from your time with her?

I remember everything. We lived in Grand Rapids, Mich., in a very lower-middle-class environment. She went to work everyday. She was a secretary at a law firm. And I did my hooligan, roughneck think. I went to a school that integrated deaf and mentally retarded kids, and I was sort of the self-appointed defender of these kids. I always got expelled for getting in fights with kids who'd torment the handicapped kids. And my mother was always OK with it. It was important to know somebody would stand behind me for doing what I believed in.

Tell me about your first years in California with your father.

Well, I completely embraced it. The whole picture out here was just a natural high - the costumes that people were wearing, the music that people were playing, the art that people were making - I loved it. The first time I smoked pot, I was with my dad, and to me, it just seemed like I'd landed in this magical kingdom where anything was possible. I got stoned, and my father had a girl over at the house, and she didn't have her shirt on. I said to myself, you know, "How lucky could a boy be?" At the time, I thought I was the luckiest kid on the block.

What do you think now?

Well, it had its good points and its bad points. As far as the drug thing goes, I don't regret anything in that area, because it got me where I am today, and I'm cool with that. But it definitely introduced a struggle into my life. Having no limits, I had to personally determine what I was capable of doing and what would bring me to an early grave. It took me a long time, and I lost friends along the way, but now I know from first-hand experience.

Openness and self-discovery seem important to you, but it's very rare that I read an article that gives me any real sense of what you're like. You always seem a little aloof. Has anybody ever told you that before?

Yeah. And it always seems kind of surprising to me until I really think about it, and then I realize that I very rarely express the inner core of my feelings to somebody that I haven't known for a long time. I'm not afraid to talk about anything. Do you want to know my sign or what time I get up or something?

Oh, I have a whole lot of questions like that.

OK, rattle 'em off.

What thing about you would surprise people the most if they knew it?

I guess different people would be surprised by different things.

Don't you wear bunny pajamas or something?

I think everything about me would surprise people. I think the feelings they'd developed about me based on the media would be counteracted once they met me.

What kind of things do people say to you after they get to know you?

They tell me what a bastard I am.

What do they really tell you? "Gee, you're no the bastard I thought you were?"

That's actually much more accurate. Like the girl I'm going out with now. When her parents found out she was going out with me, they were very disturbed. But I started talking to her mother on the telephone, and she realized that she was wrong for having jumped to conclusions about me.

What do you most like about yourself?

[Pauses] It's really hard for me to get through the barrier of that question.

Try.

Well, I like my appreciation for nature. I feel I have a definite bond with nature.

How'd you fare in the recent earthquake?

Chad and I were flying over Los Angeles in an airplane when it hit; the pilot came over the intercom and said, "L.A. was just stricken by a massive earthquake, and we can't land." So, very much to my dismay, I missed the quake. I truly relish natural acts of what people call disaster. To me, they're divine. The other natural disaster I love is tornados. The visual beauty of a tornado just bowls me over. They've got those skinny, slinky, sexy, snaky black tornados that move their hips from side to side, and they've got big barreling, white, fat cylinders that march across the land. I also love hurricanes and floods and that kind of stuff. It's beautiful to me.

Well, this is sure your era to be alive.

I think we're living in a very entertaining and compelling era. Not to be light-hearted about it, but it's very amusing to watch the world crumble. We think we're so important and that every act of our daily lives means something, but we're a flash in the pan. I think we're going to see the collapse of all of the things people hold so sacred - like religion and government.

You mention religion. Are you very spiritual?

I feel very spiritually ignorant. My understanding is so microscopic in the overall scheme of things that the best thing I can do in this lifetime is accept everything that happens and deal with it as it comes. To me, it's more about what I do along the way than what I'm searching for.

Here's a fun hypothetical question: You're sent to prison for 10 years. Who do you most want as a cellmate?

I'd take Tom Waits as a cellmate. I might take Lorena Bobbitt as a cellmate.

Give us your thoughts on the Bobbitt case.

Well, this guy that she was with seemed like such an extraordinary jerk that I had absolutely zero sympathy for him. You know, outside the courtroom signing T-shirts and stuff like that... He disgusted me. So I wasn't all that inflamed by her act, and I wasn't upset that she got off.

You seem fairly even-tempered. Does anything really make you mad?

Well, I get disgusted, but it's always temporary. A lot of different music disgusts me because it's so artificial. I'd rather be elated by Jane's Addiction or Fugazi or Ice Cube than spend my time listening to something that's revolting.

Such as...

You want me to name names?

Of course I do.

That's Flea's area. He's better at listing people who make him want to throw up.

How dependent are you on Flea? Could you see the Chili Peppers without him?

The Red Hot Chili Peppers are Flea. He's such an essential portion of this pie that it's impossible to think that the band would exist without him.

What about you?

Or without me. And we wouldn't want to. I mean, the Red Hot Chili Peppers aren't going anywhere, but when we do disappear, we'll disappear together.

Where do you think you'll be in 10 or 15 years? Could you see yourself doing this at 45?

I could. I think it would be cool as fuck to be doing music at age 45 with the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

With the socks and the fire helmets and the whole shtick?

No, we'll be doing something new. We'll have the fire helmets on our cocks and the socks over our heads.

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