

METAL HAMMER, 1999

FORNICATING CALIFORNIA STYLE

The Beverly Hills Hotel on Sunset Boulevard is a five star retreat, temporary home to the rich and famous. Millionaires and their young "secretaries" have lunch by the pool and haute couture is a regular topic of conversation. In the background film star Rupert Everett can be seen strolling around the grounds.

In one of the more exclusive rear bungalows the Red Hot Chili Peppers have moved in, transforming the area into something resembling the backstage enclave of their rock 'n' funk show.

Bass guitarist Flea is fooling around with a shower cap, pulling it on and off his head. Anthony Kiedis, wearing a motorbike helmet and a red bandana, looks like a bandit. Chad Smith, the Chilis' drummer, prefers to remain on the sidelines. Once their antics have quietened down, the conversation kicks off with their new album.

Your new album is titled 'Californication'. Do you know any bad cases of Californication?

Flea: It's a terrible disease that's around us constantly, a worldwide disease. It's basically about the influence that Hollywood culture has on the rest of the world. It sometimes serves as a way of expressing good art and noble ideas on the planet - but those are rare occasions. Generally speaking, it's a vehicle that suppresses individuality and forces bad art down people's throats. It's pathetic but it's the state of the world. The whole question of global media and how close we come together is beautiful and comrade like, but it also stops individual cultures having their own identity.

You could leave the area...

Flea: This is my home, it's where we live. I've been living in Los Angeles since 1972. Many of the people I love are here. I have a lot of good memories here, but if it wasn't for the fact that I have to stay because of my daughter, I'd leave. I'd probably go to Australia. I love it there. There's a much higher quality of life in general.

Why did it take four years for the Chilis to make a new album?

Chad: Well, we made 'One Hot Minute', then we did the tour after that. After that, we wanted to relax and rejuvenate our creative juices. It isn't like a time-frame thing where you have to make a record every 18 months; we don't punch any sort of creative clock. It's about having life experiences so we can be creative and want to make music. Towards the end of the 'One Hot Minute' album it was no fun. It started to be just a job and that doesn't make you wanna rush back into it.

Then we had some downtime. Flea was writing songs, I did a project with Dave Navarro and a lot of other things. We were living our lives and then John [Frusciante] rejoined us in May. We wrote some songs, recorded them and here we are.

How did John return come about?

Chad: Flea talked to him first.

Flea: I just asked him to rejoin and he said yes. After we split with Dave Navarro we asked John to join us. Fortunately, he said yes. We didn't know what was in store for us because John is a free-flowing, wild and crazy man. But having him back is a real blessing. It makes me so happy that I realise everything had to happen the way it did over the past few years in order for things to loop back around.

As soon as he returned he had the opportunity to play music that's really, really fun...to spontaneously improvise. To feel natural and good about playing music - to play it just for the pure reasons. John is a very pure artist, and that inspires the most pure part of our band.

Couldn't that have happened with Dave?

Flea: It was possible but difficult. It's not Dave's fault. The chemistry we have with John was hard to achieve with Dave; we're different kinds of people. Dave is a tremendous guitarist and a tremendous artist, but it didn't work with us.

Has John changed? Why couldn't you help him with his doubts about being a rock star in the first place?

Flea: John has changed a lot. He's very committed in his feelings, whatever they are. It reached a point where he was so miserable - and why couldn't we say, "Hey, don't be miserable, be happy because you're with us"? I was too miserable to help him not get miserable. I just wanted to stay in the band, I didn't see the band as the thing that was killing me. Maybe I did, but I stuck it out.

John couldn't deal with it. He sat in the back of the bus, miserable. He didn't want to play music. He didn't want to do anything, he really hated it. When he left it was a relief.

What's so special about working with John? When you reconnected with him you were coming up with loads and loads of new songs.

Flea: The thing that we have with John, which we also had with Hillel [Slovak, first guitarist], was the feeling of improvising a lot. Just getting in there and jamming, improvising on a groove, making a noise for a long time. There's a lot of experimentation. You discover new sounds, new music and new ways of expression. We never had that with Dave; it was always a deeply thought-out process that took a lot of time. We'd sit and talk. "Well, should we take a D chord or a C sharp?" Whereas with John we don't talk. We just close our eyes and play. It's a very natural fluid thing. It's telepathy. That's where the best music comes from. Jamming has always been the key to the Chilis' existence.

Did you feel like giving up over the past four years?

Flea: After 'One Hot Minute' came out we worked that record for over a year, touring and promoting it. Then for about six months we didn't do anything. Dave and I went and did Jane's Addiction, and for six months after that I was getting ready to make a solo album. I was just about to record it when John came back to the band and I said, "Fuck it! I'll do it another time." There was definitely a time when I questioned whether we'd ever do it again, but it wasn't like, "I quit!". It reached a point where it just wasn't fun any more. Where it felt like we were doing it just because we had this big, famous band and there was money and it was a good job. But it wasn't the inspiration. The heart wasn't flowing with it as well as it needed to. So it was: "What are we gonna do?" We parted ways with Dave and got back with John and it became the most heart-reaffirming thing; a beautiful, beautiful thing. We're very lucky for that.

You once called yourselves the 'psychedelic sex funk band from heaven'.

Flea: I never called it that. Anthony made that up. It seemed like a good way to describe our music. We were into playing psychedelic funk, that's for sure. We grew up with the aggressiveness of punk rock, so that element of our music will always be there. But if we were to play the same music forever we'd be bored and people would get bored.

Why do so many members of this band take heavy drugs?

Flea: I don't know why people take drugs. I think they take them because they're sad and they have a big, empty hole inside them that they try to fill with drugs. It's a mistake people make all over the world – not just members of this band. People do the damndest things to get away from that pain, but it doesn't work. Addiction is a very powerful and difficult thing for the addict to deal with – and for the people who care about the addict to deal with.

The culture we grew up in was very conducive to that, particularly when Anthony, me and John were growing up in Hollywood. Chad didn't grow up in Hollywood; he came here when he was an adult. We just grew up in that culture, doing drugs. We were pretty wild (laughs)...

You never look heroin, did you?

Flea: I've taken heroin. I'm not proud of it, but I was never a junkie. I still have my own problems, but they haven't manifested themselves in me becoming a junkie. Everyone has problems and everyone deals with them in different ways. I know a lot of people who aren't drug addicts but are just as emotionally unhealthy. They might be a bitter, angry person for their whole life and never accept their own mistakes. Everyone has their way of dealing with the same shit.

When you read books about the Chili Peppers. they always refer to 'sexual battery' and 'indecent exposure'. Is that just a sign of prudishness in American society?

Flea: It's not so much a sign of the prudishness of American society, but a sign of greed. I could go into specific details of things we've been accused of and defend ourselves, or I could explain it in a quicker way – once you achieve a certain level of fame and someone sees an opportunity to make money off that, they're gonna do it. Unfortunately, we've been in situations where people thought they could make money off us through accusing us of sexual indecency. All I can do is tell you, from the bottom of my heart, is that I love and respect all women. I would never harm or try to physically overpower a woman. I respect and adore femininity.

A remarkable thig about 'Californication' is the lack of f-words. Have you lost your edge?

Chad: You should be talking to Anthony about this. He writes the lyrics. I don't think profanity has anything to do with edge. They're just words which help you express ideas. There are other words which are just as powerful.

Flea: It's a funny question, because our edge is definitely different. I feel less edgy as a person. I'd like to feel less edgy. It's more comfortable to feel less edgy. If you're gonna play music, you'll always be trying to move forward and not stagnate.

The new record sounds more wholesome. Have you come to terms with your reckless life?

Flea: It's hard for me to evaluate my life. It's hard to evaluate anyone's life in this band. I'm 36 now – I learn about what works and what doesn't. If reckless means being manipulative of other people or sex without love, not taking care of my body, not being conscious of people's feelings – then these are all things I try and improve upon. I'm too close to know if that comes out in the music. I definitely want to be at peace with myself and with the spirit world.

What did you guys learn from the 'One Hot Minute' sessions?

Chad: We learnt that the Chilis work best when we're prepared before we enter the studio. It was important that we had loads of songs to choose from when we started to record 'Californication'. So all we had to worry about was recording well, getting good versions of the songs. That way it's relaxed and we sound confident – Anthony sounds confident. We did it really fast – in three weeks.

Flea: We weren't together as a band for the last album. We made a record because we wanted to, but we didn't have the unity and creative cohesiveness to get in there and just rock out. There's not a mystery to making a record, you know. When a band spends a year in the studio they don't know what the fuck they're doing. It's a rock record, come on...it's not fucking rocket science or brain surgery; it's writing songs and recording them.

Chad, what does it mean to you to work with Flea?

Chad: We don't say that much.

Flea: We say a lot.

Chad: There's no reason to when you've got the musical telepathy we have. We've been playing together for 10 years. I love playing with Flea, he's one, if not the best, musician I've ever played with. John's right up there too. We're fortunate to have this musical friendship. I said to some guitar magazine, "He's the James Jamerson [mega bassist, who's worked with many Motown stars] of the new millennium". He's so good, he doesn't need a drummer; he's got his own drummer.

River Phoenix was a close friend of yours. and Gus Van Sandt (the director of My Own Private Idaho, which starred River) took the photographs for one of your albums. Have you ever thought of writing a film score?

Flea: A score? Yeah, I like to do film scores. The best art that comes from Germany are the films.

Chad: What about Rammstein? They're pretty humorous.

How much are you into surfing these days?

Flea: Chad's never surfed a day in his life. I love to surf but I haven't been surfing lately. In the last six months I was too sad to surf and I wanna start again. I had bad girlfriend stuff. Thank God she's not the mother of my daughter. It started when we were writing 'Road Trippin' [title of a song on the new album about a jolly surf tour]. I was surfing up in Big Sur and everything was great. We were by the tire and we wrote the song on acoustic guitars. Then I call up my girlfriend in Australia and said: "How you doing?" " I've been with someone else." Oh great!

You guys are experts on sex. Has Americans' attitude towards sex changed - specially after the Clinton-Lewinsky affair?

Flea: I'm definitely not an expert on sex. I'm just a little cuddly guy. The whole Clinton blow-job thing... it's a sad state of affairs when the media needs that to invigorate itself. That's worse than being a drug addict. I would rather be a crackhead junkie than someone who can't mind their own business. Being a politician is like being a rock star.

Chad: It's power. Women are attracted to politicians. They want to hang out with them. Clinton just picks interesting times to get it on. Who really cares? I want him too.

Flea: May his sperm burst forth.

Chad: Absolutely! You don't get to his position without doing things like that. It's nothing bad and it doesn't affect how he runs the country. I don't give a shit. He can get blown whenever he wants. In fact, he should.

Flea: At the same time no one pays attention to the public school education system. The rate of unemployment is massive. People are starving to death, the international policy is manipulative and power hungry. Every American thinks America is the centre of the universe and the president gets blow-jobs. That's their main concern.

Chad: They spent too much time on it. There's other things that it completely overshadowed.

What about the upcoming tour? Are you going to wear socks again?

Flea: Actually, my penis has gotten so big, I can't fit it into a sock any more.

People who see us live know that we give everything we've got. The last time we played a shitty show was at a festival in Germany; the sound was bad and we sucked.