

Red Hot Chili Peppers - Red Hot Chili Peppers Interview

"CD Now.com" (Septembre 2000) - Allison Stewart

The Red Hot Chili Peppers have been together almost half their lives and famous for as long as they can remember. More than 17 years after singer Anthony Kiedis and bassist Flea met at Los Angeles' Fairfax High School, the band has sold umpteen million records, dealt with drug addiction, the various hazards of fame, and the 1988 death of guitarist Hillel Slovak. They have since endured a rotating lineup of guitarists that included Jane's Addiction's Dave Navarro, Arik Marshall, Jessie Tobias, and John Frusciante, who left the band in 1992 and recently returned.

The Peppers' latest record, Californication, which comes five years after the less-than-smashingly-successful 1995 release, One Hot Minute, has sold more copies than anything they've done previously, and the band's lineup seems more solid than it ever has. Singer Anthony Kiedis and drummer Chad Smith spoke with CDNOW recently about the band's tumultuous past, its bright present and what it feels like to be a member of one of rock's biggest bands.

CDNOW: Californication was your first record after almost five years off, and it's become your most successful one yet. Did that surprise you?

Anthony Kiedis: I think it certainly oversold any sort of expectations, not that we had them, because we were pretty satisfied when we made that record. We felt like, "Wow, we came back from the dead." We rocked. We recorded something that we were totally proud of, that was beautiful, that really is what we are. At that point, we were like, "Let the chips fall where they may," because we'd done our work here, and the results are sort of in the hands of the universe. And we'll be happy either way, because we really were.

You say you came back from the dead. How close to dead were you?

Kiedis: I use that as a metaphor really for kind of [becoming] discombobulated. We lost our focus and our spiritual connection with what it is that we loved doing, which was playing music together. But it was there. It was just lying dormant and forgotten.

There have been many times when the Peppers were on the verge of extinction -- true extinction and feigned extinction. Sometimes, maybe somebody in the band became extra fed-up that day with negative circumstances and said, "Auugh, I'm calling it quits. I'm throwing in the towel." It never really seemed like it was meant to die. It just seemed like that sick dog that was going to pull through in the end.

So was it the friendship that kept it going?

Kiedis: Yeah, definitely love, friendship -- being members of the mutual admiration society, an intangible and inexplicable mystery quotient, something in the air, something in the universe, some kind of love, some kind of power greater than ourselves, some kind of it has to be.

Talk about the first time you guys all played again together. Did it just click? Was it like riding a bike?

Kiedis: Are you trying to call John Frusciante a bicycle? **Headline:** John Frusciante is a bicycle. It was really quite emotional and beautiful to play with John again for the first time. It was unexpected and we were kind of groveling, [we were] at a loss. And Flea proposed to me, "I don't think this band is going to work unless maybe we start playing with John again." And I was like, "John? What makes you think John wants to play with us?" I hadn't spoken to him for five years. He was off, doing his own thing. He had gotten healthy; he had gotten well with himself. [Flea] was like, "I don't know, I just have the feeling that John might want to come back and play."

So we called him up and he was ecstatic and he blushed furiously. We just went into Flea's garage and truly, from chord one, note one, rhythm one, it just felt like a magical unit back together again. We didn't feel like we were rehashing or reuniting, like "Let's do the reunion thing," like we had missed a few years, but it was now.

Had you spoken to him in the interim or heard reports of what was going on with him?

Kiedis: I knew that he was going through rough and bizarre scenarios in his personal life. I ran into him here and there, but we had never really gotten over our own hang-ups so we could reconnect as friends.

You've been famous almost longer than you've not been famous. Is it weird to think of what things used to be like, back when you were a struggling band?

Kiedis: It was good. What we used to be like was great. [There were] so many beautiful episodes of growing up: Famous or not famous, [we were] hooligans, rascalions, wandering rogues, misfits, people that were in love with art just because and pursued that just because, and just happened to end up in the spotlight.

How often does the business of being in a band interfere with your friendships? Do you still all hang out?

Kiedis: We spend so much time on the road, in buses and planes and stages and backstages that when we go home, we separate for a while, but our friendship runs deeper than just this band. During our next break, I plan on going up to Big Sur

with Flea, and John has always invited me over to go swimming in his saltwater pool. We're friends.

So is this the best that it's ever been? Everybody's healthy; the record is more successful than ever.

Kiedis: No, all stages are beautiful. Even the lowly stages make it a complete experience.

Maybe in retrospect they are beautiful, but at the time ...

Kiedis: We have had some of the greatest experiences ever when we were just a punk rock bar band, hopping from beer hall to beer hall playing for 20 people at a time. That was elation. We thought we were on top of the world. We were able to express [ourselves] freely and without bizarre scrutiny. It's all been good. We are not complaining. This is a good time. We are kissing the ground everyday.

Chad, everyone says that you're the normal one in the group, the stable one. Is that true?

Chad Smith: Well, I guess we all have very strong personalities. So it's all relative that I'm the normal guy in the band, but compared to what -- a normal guy in the street? Yeah, I'm the guy in the street. I think that being the drummer, yes, it's important to have a grounding effect or presence in the band, or when we are onstage. It's important, the balance of the different personalities in our group. If we were all the same, it would be really boring. We are very different people. We all have strong ideas and personalities and that's what makes the chemistry what it is, and it's a very important part of it, absolutely. With our band, it's all about the chemistry.

Do you guys travel in your own buses and have all the jaded, rock star trappings? It seems like when that happens to bands, it's the beginning of the end.

Smith: We do have some of the perks of being pompous, bloated, disgustingly out-of-touch-with-reality rock stars, so we do have the pampering. We travel in an adolescent bubble. We don't each have our own bus, but we have two buses. It's easier for travel, and we have more room to spread out. We have a lot of love for each other and a lot of respect. We spend a lot of time together. For the past year, we've been on the road constantly. I see those guys more than I see my wife, if I had one.

It must be like being in a bubble. People must constantly tiptoe around you to let you "create" and things like that. How do stay a normal person?

Smith: People tiptoe around us, if anything, because they are scared of us. Like some people think that we are this mean, drugged-out, crazy, wild, rock band. You know, people look at us like we are in the zoo. That's kind of weird, but no, we've been doing it a long time. It's not like it's an overnight success thing; we've been a band for 16 years. We were really popular in 1992 when Blood Sugar Sex Magik came out. We were on Lollapalooza [back then], and "Under the Bridge" and "Give It Away" were very big hits, and it was the first time that we really exploded in a mainstream kind of way. It was kind of weird then, because people want to know about your haircut and your tattoo, and things that have nothing to do with music. But now, eight years later, we're not the trendy band of the moment. We're not the Korn or the Limp Bizkit and whoever else....

Can you walk around unrecognized?

Smith: Yeah, because I'm the guy in the back; I'm the drummer. Luckily, I don't get [noticed] too much. If we go places where music is, but then again, they are always very nice. People don't bug me. Not like Anthony sometimes. We'll be at airports and people that don't know anything about the band will say, "Hey, that's the guy from MTV. Run like you do in the video, man." And he's very good about it. I don't get that. I get musicians or drummers or fans of the band that know us. And again, they just want to say hey.

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