

Red Hot Chili Peppers - Sound Off

"Wall Of Sound" (Février 2001)

With an album title like Californication, it sounds like the Red Hot Chili Peppers are back to their old ways of funky irreverence and strategically placed tube socks. Kind of - but not quite. With the return of guitarist John Frusciante after a seven-year absence - during which he was replaced by Jane's Addiction vet Dave Navarro - the lineup that made 1991's multiplatinum Blood Sugar Sex Magik has reunited and gotten down to serious business, which means plenty of down and dirty grooving, as well as some lushly crafted pop songs. But there's a decidedly more sober tone to Californication, too, particularly in frontman Anthony Kiedis' lyrics, which run both thoughtful and, in the album-closing "Road Trippin'," sweetly sentimental. This is the adult Chili Peppers - drug habits kicked, combined with a musical focus unequalled in the group's 16-year career. They're also elder statesmen of the modern rock scene, vets of Lollapalooza and Woodstock, and forebears to every blend of funk, metal, and hip-hop that you hear on the radio today. But Kiedis, Frusciante, bassist Flea, and drummer Chad Smith still pack a virile sonic punch, which is why teenagers flocked to see them at a handful of anti-violence/pro-tolerance shows that preceded Californication's release. A lot of water has gone "Under the Bridge," as it were, but drummer Chad Smith says it's still fun to be a Pepper, too.

Hearing the album and seeing you guys live, it feels like the Chili Peppers have picked up the string of a story that was rudely interrupted or something.

Yeah, it's like that. The chemistry with the four of us is the best lineup, I think, to make Red Hot Chili Peppers music. I was anxious to see if that would work again, and it has. It's really getting a second chance, like a rebirth. We're all really in a good place now, and it's exciting again. I think it had run its course with Dave; we weren't really too inspired to make new music and stuff. It wasn't really fun anymore. It was more of a job. He wasn't fired or anything like that; it was just a mutual "See ya later." I think it was more we felt the chemistry was really good with John, so we were gonna give it a shot and try it again. Now we're playing music for fun, enjoying ourselves.

How did John come to be back in the group? Did he call and say "Hi, I'm clean. Let's play?"

No, he would never do that because he's not a pursuer in that respect. Flea had seen John from time to time, when he was out of the band. And Flea was talking to him and said, "What do you think of playing?" and John was like "Yeah, that sound good." So Flea called me up one day and asked if I wanted to come over and watch the Lakers game. Then he calls me back and said, "Anthony's coming over, but he has to leave, so can you come early?" I knew something was up. Then we got there, and he asked, "What do you think about bringing John in again?" I was like "Wow! Really?!" When he left, it was bad, really bad - especially between him and Anthony. But I said, "If it works and he's into it, yeah."

Californication lives up to its title, not so much in the fornication department but in what seems to be a thematic focus on California.

It does have some California references, yeah. I mean, we're from Hollywood, and Anthony writes the words and lyrics and stuff. The song "Californication" is his take on how he travels and sees how Hollywood and California affects the rest of the world, and how people look at the whole media thing and see how you're supposed to dress like this and act like this - and a lot of times it's pretty negative. So it's a very honest portrayal; there's a lot of good and bad things about California and Hollywood, and lots of times it can be unrealistic and very weird. I think that's kind of the take on this one.

Since joining the Chili Peppers in 1988, you've seen your share of drug abuse and erratic behavior. What kind of perspective do you have on that lifestyle from these experiences?

The thing with drugs and stuff, it seems to work for people for awhile, at the beginning, for whatever they're getting out of it. And my experience is that it stops working after awhile and it becomes all about the drugs and nothing else. It's not funny; it's frustrating, actually, and then they have to come out of it, which takes a long time - and some people don't. With John, he just got tired of it; it stopped working for him, and he just kind of closed that chapter. Now he's really focused and really inspiring to play with us.

Did you enjoy the high school tour you did before Californication was released?

It turned out to be a cool thing. And it was all kids, just really young kids, which is kind of weird. We do have a young crowd, but when it's all kids, it's not like the drunk, rowdy concert crowd that you're used to. They still enjoyed themselves; it was just a little bit different, but it was fun. They were just partying and liked seeing the Chili Peppers in a small place. It was a pretty cool thing.

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