

John Frusciante - Universally Speaking

"Guitarist" (nº? - Juin 2003) - Phil Ascott

Photos: Simon Dodd

Guitarist goes backstage to meet Red Hot Chili Peppers John Frusciante, the man behind last year's finest guitar album. Join us as we find out why he can't bear to listen to that album now, how he's rebuilt his guitar arsenal after a house fire destroyed his old collection, how he approaches soloing and chord theory, and why we'll be hearing a lot more from him in the coming months.

Plus : Ben Bartlett meets John's guitar tech Dave Lee to get the low-down on his gear. While Adrian Clark show how to play the Frusciante way. Enjoy

It's 8 pm and we're standing in lone, eyes fixed on the glow from Manchester Evening News Arena's only cash machine. The line stretches almost the whole way across the lobby area and contains people from all walks of life shuffling from foot to foot, wondering if they'll ever get into the arena, let alone to the bar.

Tonight, the place is positively swarming with music lovers. Pretty young punks with their chains jangling; old rockers in battered leathers; svelte new wavers with a second skin of black denim; bright-eyed teens getting drunk on a school night; smart casual thirtysomethings feeling hip and trendy. Tall, short, black, white, blonde, red, hot and chilly, they're all there. Because the world's biggest rock band are in town and quite simply, everywhere else is nowhere, man.

The universal appeal of the Red Hot Chili Peppers right now is astounding. For a band that once famously were nothing but socks on their cocks and were marginalized as sexist rap-metal goons, their transformation to mega-selling, supermodel-dating world-beaters seems extraordinary. Yet, look a little closer at the Chili Peppers' rollercoaster 20-year career path and it soon becomes obvious what, or rather who, is responsible for its peaks and troughs.

When John Frusciante joined the band in 1988 they'd already been a going concern for five years, recorded three mediocre albums and showed little prospect for improvement. Sure, Flea was an awesome talent and Anthony Kiedis a memorable frontman, but musical inspiration and melodic focus was negligible. The effects of John's introduction were felt contiguously. Fourth album *Mother's Milk* featured their first MTV-friendly tracks, *Higher Ground* and *Knock Me Down*, and led to major label record deal with Warner Brothers. Then 1991's *BoodSugarSexMagik* followed, selling millions worldwide, and within the space of three years Frusciante had turned the Chilis in to bona fide rock stars.

In 1992, when tensions between Frusciante and Kiedis reached breaking point, Frusciante quit the band. His life began a downward spiral through isolation, introspection and drug addiction; likewise the Chili Peppers' career followed a similar descent. It took three years and four different guitarists before they finally settled on a replacement - ex Jane's Addiction man Dave Navarro - but 1995's *One Hot Minute* album was a pale imitation of earlier successes. Things never really geeled with Navarro and his departure two years later was hardly surprising. The band had hit rock bottom.

By 1996 heroin controlled Frusciante's life; his house had burnt down, his teeth rotted away, his body was scarred and his mind ruled by ghosts and demons. The Reaper beckoned. Only a term in rehab clinic saved him from certain doom and he emerged drug-free in 1997, only to be courted soon by his ex-bandmates who again needed a savior to rescue them from obscurity. John duly obliged, and bingo, here we are two albums and six years later with the Chilis back on top of the world.

It's late afternoon and we're backstage, still awaiting John's arrival. Comprised of long white corridors and floors plastered with luminous duct tape guiding the way to the stage, the whole area is sadly rather unglamorous. There are no groupies loitering expectantly, no trays loaded with narcotics being generously passed around, and certainly no sign of any supermodels. These days the Chili Peppers are a highly professional, drug-free unit. And it shows. That said, it's not hard to pick out their dressing room among the almost exclusively plain backstage lounging areas. First of all you can smell it. A heady waft of incense emanates from within, contrasting the cannabis stench synonymous with many rock star dressing rooms. Then there's the lighting. A haze of reds and greens that's ambient, atmospheric, gentle and relaxing - the polar opposite of the stark neon strip-lighting that dominates elsewhere and perfect for the meditation and stretching rituals that form an important part of the band's pre-show routine. And finally, nestling just inside the doorway, there's the final give away; Flea and John's warm-up guitars - two beautiful eye-catching pieces of luthiery, a customized Modulus bass and an orange Fender Jaguar.

As we stroll by, Anthony Kiedis emerges, glances in our direction and heads off towards hospitality. Once you get past his surprisingly diminutive stature (he's around 5'7" tall), he looks every inch a star, his healthy LA tan and flowing locks belie the fact that he recently celebrated his 40th birthday. Members of support band The Mars Volta saunter past in the opposite direction looking suitably cool in skin-black leathers and funny Afros. Then, at last, an hour later than scheduled, Frusciante appears.

Taller than Kiedis by a couple of inches, though similarly shorter than you'd expect, John greets us warmly. We've been warned that he doesn't like being photographed, so to make the process slightly less painful we allow him to strap on his Jaguar, plug in to a small Electro-Harmonix amp and start his warm up early. Although initially on edge, as soon as he starts to noodle around the fretboard you can see the tension drain away. Indeed, by the time we sit to begin the interview he looks relaxed and ready for questioning.

Unsurprisingly, we begin discussing the huge success of *By The Way*, Guitarist's Album Of The Year last year. Frusciante's ultra melodic lead lines and lush vocal harmonies dominate proceedings, and considering John sang every backing vocal on the record he must have really worked on his voice.

"Yeah I have a teacher and it's helped make me a lot more consistent" he begins, his answers slightly slurred, often leaving random pauses between words as if he's giving every sentence intense thought. "I did a lot of singing on the Chili Peppers record, but on my new solo record I think my singing has got to a much higher place. On the Chili Peppers record, even though I sing a lot on it, to me it seems restrained because I am fitting into a background place. Plus I doubled everything so there's not much personality there. On my album I don't double anything. There are harmonies, but only two or three at a time, so you really hear the personality of the voices that are singing".

The album John is referring to, and which he seems very keen to talk about, is his fourth solo record, due for release later this

year. A collaboration with the talented musician Josh Klinghoffer (although the record will be released under John's name) it contains Frusciante songs dating from the time of his last solo record through to the By The Way sessions and features some notable guest appearances. "The oldest songs on the album were written at the time I wrote the last songs for my solo record" explains John "but they obviously required real drums, not a drum machine, which I used for that record. For this record Chad (Smith, the Chili's drummer) played the drums. Josh and I had the drum parts worked out and Chad just came in and belted 'em out like a session musician and did a really great job. Flea plays upright bass on one song. It's his first upright bass performance on a record and he did an amazing job. Plus Omar from The Mars Volta plays slide guitar on two of the songs".

Like all Frusciante's solo releases to date, these new recordings are more experimental than his work in the Chilis. This time around it's John's current passion for electronica and modular synthesis that surfaces. "There's a lot of very experimental electronic music on this album" John admits "but allied to good songs. The synthesizers are usually used in a very subtle way – the songs are basically acoustic guitar, drums and bass with additional Mellotron or synthesizer and electronic sound here and there. The way it's recorded is a lot more colorful than anything I've ever done before. The entire recording was done according to an aesthetic. The microphones we used were all old microphones and a lot of the drums were recorded on an eight-track and then bounced to 24-track. Every effort was made to make all the sounds as warm as possible, and in a lot of ways it has the same vibe and warmth as sixties and early seventies recordings. That's the feeling we tried to capture".

In fact, Frusciante's hands-on approach to his solo work and growing confidence in mixing and engineering music has led him to question producer Rick Rubin's treatment of By The Way – to the extent that at present he finds it hard to even contemplate a new Chilis record.

"To tell you the truth, I've had a really hard time accepting that By The Way is actually finished" says Frusciante, his face displaying a look of frustration and sadness. "On my record you'll notice any interesting sound that comes in is loud. For me that's what keeps my interest going in a record. I don't want them to get in the way of the vocal, but I'm also not paranoid about stepping on the vocal. Rick really mixes the vocals high and pushes anything that matches the vocals power back so it doesn't come anywhere near it. I can't even listen to our last record because of that; the mix just drives me so crazy. For the first time Rick was nice enough to let me have something to do with the mixing process, where I was saying how loud to put this harmony next to this harmony and stuff. But the big picture was left to him. But in the course of time I've really developed my own opinions as far as that goes, so for my album you'll see it's done differently and I hope that the next Chili Peppers record can be more like mine".

"Finishing my solo record has calmed something inside of me because at least I'm proud of it, 100 per cent. With By The Way there are so many things about it I wish were different and I can't let go of it, you know? I can't just admit to myself that it's happened".

Luckily, Frusciante has had the chance to make amends as various tracks are culled from the record for single release. "We remixed Can't Stop for the single and I like that mix a million times better" John confirms "And we just did a remix of Universally Speaking because they're thinking of releasing as a single, and I like that a lot better too. When we get these opportunities to remix songs I get to get them the way I want. I guess I hadn't really refined my ability to trust my own instincts about things. I was used to just handing the tapes over and letting Rick mix them however he felt best and I was always happy with them. My approach now is so much more multi-dimensional than just playing guitar".

These days Frusciante is a man totally immersed in music. He lives it, breathes it, eats it and sleeps it. And more than likely when he's sleeping, he dreams it. His knowledge of music is encyclopedic, his hunger for it seemingly insatiable. Get him on the subject of his favorite current artists and the range of styles and generations they cover is impressive. "I've been listening to some of this very abstract electronic music that's been made now" Frusciante begins, his enthusiasm for the subject palpable "Rosy Parlane, Pita and a guy called Fennesz. He's a great guitar player too, and all his albums are good and all totally different. It's just very abstract music where there's no beat. The timing's very different and that's what sounds interesting to me. I also listen to a lot of folk music like Joan Baez, Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span, as well as stuff like King Crimson, Emerson Lake and Palmer, Mott The Hoople and Slade. I don't pay attention to the world. I just have the art I like and the music I like and for me that's the whole world".

Estimated to be 2,000-strong around 10 years ago, Frusciante admits that he now has no idea how large his record collection is. "I haven't figured it out, maybe I'll do an estimate sometime".

With such a tough touring schedule and a continuous flow of press commitments, John even has to call in some favors to make time to pursue his vintage vinyl obsession. "When I was in Spain a couple of weeks ago this girl got the keys to her dad's record store and kept it open between two and six in the morning, so that was fun" he reveals. "But lately I just haven't had the time as I wake up so late. My whole day consists of just a few hours of practicing, warming up my voice and stuff".

Shopping for guitars has proved equally difficult for Frusciante, and having lost all his previous axes in a house fire a few years back, John had to start building his collection again from scratch. The Jaguar he posed with for today's photo shoot was his first acquisition. "I bought that at a guitar store, I think it was Voltage Guitars on Sunset, in 1997. "I didn't have a guitar and then got some money and that was my Christmas present to myself. Then when the guys asked me to rejoin the band I said that I really need a Stratocaster. So Anthony lent me some money and we went to Guitar Center and I got the one with the rosewood neck. It's a '62 and I used that one on practically every track on By The Way".

The only notable exception was the track Tear, on which John played his big old Gretsch White Falcon. He appropriated that particular guitar with the help of his good friend, actor and musician Vincent Gallo.

"Yeah, Vincent found that one for me. It's a '57 that used to be his but he had sold it to somebody and he had to buy it back from them. He's really a wheeler and dealer, you know?" says John of his friend. "He's known as an actor and director but his real profession is a wheeler and dealer!". He smiles. "He just argued with this guy and caused an ugly situation to get it back".

Did you want it because it looked good? "No, I wanted one because Matthew Ashman, the guitarist from Bow Wow Wow, used one" claims John "His wasn't from the fifties though, it was from the seventies, but that's why I wanted it. At that time him and Bernard Sumner from Mew Order were the two guitarists who I was really enamored with".

John did use other guitars for the By The Way sessions, but the tracks they were used on didn't make the final cut. "We had some more rocking songs which didn't make the album where, for a distorted sound, I used an SG through a Marshall that's cranked with distortion" John remembers. "To me that's the ultimate kind of distortion sound. I have a really nice SG from 1960 – Vincent also found that for me – that's got P90s in it and it's really great. We also did a 15-minute track called

Strumming In D on J: the title literally means Strumming in the key of D on the Jaguar. I hope that we put it out, as it's a really good funky song".

Keen observes may have been surprised to see John brandishing a Fender Tornado in the video for Can't Stop. "Yeah the director asked me to play that because of the color" clarifies John "I don't play guitars unless they're from the sixties or earlier so I wouldn't play one, but it looked all right to me. I thought the shape was pretty cool. He just wanted it because of the color and he was a real dictator of a director so I didn't really argue with him!".

In case you hadn't already gathered, Frusciante is a rather busy man. So fans will be amazed to hear that he's been working on another two projects which could also see the light of day in the coming year. The first is for Gallo, who asked Frusciante to provide the soundtrack music to his forthcoming movie, The Brown Bunny, some time ago.

"I've been making music for this movie for around three years" John explains "Vincent gave me the script and left me to it. I've written a mixture of songs and instrumentals and I don't know what's gonna end up in the movie. I'll probably have so much good leftover material and I could probably make an album from it! There's a lot of really sad music as it's a sad movie. Vincent's in the middle of editing the film now and I'm really looking forward to seeing it".

The other project has arisen as a result of John and Flea's recent on stage jams, a feature of the current tour, and sees the pair returning to their musical roots. "Right around the time we finished By The Way I went to see The Mars Volta play, who are very influenced by King Crimson" John recounts "Then I went through a period of listening to King Crimson and ELP live shows. It occurred to me that back then those bands would really stretch out live, doing a lot of improvising, and people loved it. They were the biggest bands in the world and they were up on stage doing instrumentals that could last for 20 minutes. I said to Flea one day, I think we should make jamming a bigger part of the show, so we did and it's going really well. That side of Flea and mine's playing is probably going to come out even more now because we're going to make a record with Omar from Mars Volta. We've been working on it on tour and we're going to be touring together a lot for the next few months, so we just have these little rehearsals after shows. It's really the antithesis of where Flea and I were at on By The Way. It's flashy, with a lot of weird time signatures, a lot of fast playing. Omar and me do a lot of intertwining guitar parts, like Adrian Belew and Robert Fripp were doing in the eighties. When Flea started playing bass he was really into Allan Holdsworth, and for me it was progressive rock stuff and also Mahavishnu Orchestra and Tony Williams Lifetime. So it's a big side of where we come from musically."

At this rate it's hard to tell how many other projects Frusciante will become involved with in the coming months. His work ethic is phenomenal and his current attitude and outlook on life something we could all learn from. "Personally, I try to understand something new by the end of every day" he says to conclude. "Maybe it's learning a Jimmy Page solo; or maybe it's learning a Mingus song; or understanding my synthesizer a little better; or just working really hard at mixing something and learning how to do a better job in the studio. Just make every day a learning experience rather than thinking in terms of what can I show people or what can I prove to the world. Learning has that natural bi-product of something resulting from it, and so for me that has always been the main thing ever since I started learning guitar - to get better".

BLOODSUGARTECHMAGIK

IN 1988 BASS PLAYER Dave Lee was making time doing construction work. But when he almost cutt off his thumb in an accident, it was time for a change...

So, Dave, how did you come to get this gig?

At that time a friend was working for RATT as their guitar tech and he suggested I get into the profession. He hooked me up with this band King Diamond and I began helping set up the monitor system. Then, when they fired the bass tech I seemed the obvious choice. After that tour was over, another friend who has a rehearsal studio in North Hollywood, hooked me up with the guy that managed Faith No More. They still hadn't quite broken yet. I started working for them and the manager also managed other bands so I went from there to all kind of different bands. Eventually a guy that I'd worked with started working for the Chili Peppers, for Flea. Dave Navarro didn't have a guy at the time because his tech was working for someone else after Jane's Addiction had broken up, so I came in and helped out for a while, tech-ing for Dave. Then Dave left and John Frusciante came back and I stuck around.

What do you do when a tour's over?

For the last four and a half years the Chili Peppers have been so busy, there's very little time when they aren't working. I work with John in the studio too, doing his solo records and shows. He played acoustic shows for To Record Only Water For Ten Days and John is just one of those guys who loves to work, which keeps me full-time employed. I count my blessings for that. The atmosphere working with the Chili Peppers is great. They're very thoughtful people and are over the 'rock star' kind of thing.

How do the other guys feel about John doing his solo stuff?

They've been so busy that they're glad for him to keep on workin' while they have a little time off to rest.

What sort of thing does your tech-ing involve on a day to day basis?

Mostly just upkeep and changing strings. I change strings on every guitar for every gig. John's guitars are all stock and I have a particular way of locking the strings to the Kluson machineheads. John bends real hard so I have to make sure the strings are stretched in real good. We don't have much trouble considering so much of John's equipment is vintage. I use three guitar tuners; a Peterson Virtual Strobe, a BOSS TU-12 and a Korg too. You gotta be sure, right?

How are John's guitars set up?

It's not real low. Some guys have'em real low but his is pretty high.

So, what's a typical day for you?

After every show, I'll talk to John and ask if there's anything in particular that he noticed that might need to be changed or improved on. I set all the equipment up and line check it during the day. The band don't soundcheck, maybe only once every few months. They'd rather just come in and play, unless there's some kind of a sound problem that needs working out. Generally they just don't soundcheck.

It seems like John is calling the shots a lot on the new records ?

More of it has to do with people really trusting his opinion. John's kind of keyed in to what's a good idea and what isn't and so

they listen to him. There are so many bands today that I don't think are good and it's nice to see a band that can actually play, doing so well.

What's the set like right now ?

Obviously they're playing stuff off the last two records and Blood Sugar, but there's been plenty of jamming lately. They'll bust into some James Brown and stuff like that. They were having a lot of fun in London because all John's big heroes were there, man. Jimmy Page was there, Jeff Beck was there, Radiohead were there, so John was just busting out all his chops. It was really fun because in the middle of a solo you'd hear The Train Kept A Rollin' from The Yardbirds and all that kind of stuff. The guys usually jam between songs. Usually Anthony will write the set-list and then I'll go through it with John to make sure he gets the right guitar for particular songs. For example, on Soul To Squeeze he likes to be handed a Strat that's tuned just right before he gets it, because he hits it pretty hard and he wants to be confident that he's in tune right away. We also have to make sure that the song before that one will be a Tele song, so that I have the Strat to hand to him. The only time there's a problem is if they suddenly change their minds mid-set and do something I wasn't expecting.

It must be scary seeing John hit those vintage guitars so hard every night?

I keep trying to persuade John to play those Relic guitars that Fender make, but he likes the life that a vintage instrument has - the history and all the songs that it has played. But Flea has one of those Jaco Pastorius basses - The Relic one. Every little nick on that thing is the same as the original. I sent the Fender Custom Shop some pictures of John's 1962 Strat because there was a guy named Jake, that was working in the studio with us, who wanted a guitar just like that. So he was gonna have Fender make one. It seems to me like it would be a pretty cool model to build.

DAVE LEE ON THE CHILIS' STAGE SET-UP

"Everyone except Chad uses in-ear monitors. That way they can all hear a perfect mix and I have them too. My mix is the same as John's so I can hear exactly what he's hearing and if anything sounds strange I can fix it quicker. I remember at Woodstock, before we had the in-ears, John was about to launch into Around The World and nothing happened. I had to run out and turn his guitar volume up. Now we've got the in-ears I would have noticed that type of problem immediately. "John's rig is very loud. I think that now he uses the in-ears monitoring he doesn't realise how loud it is. When we started doing festivals and stuff he wanted to walk out front and to the side and he was on a long cable. If it had been any longer we'd have started losing signal, so we went to the Shure wireless system. When John rejoined the band he wasn't jumping all over the place on stage either, but I heard him say one time that he took up dancing and since then he's started going off more on stage, so the wireless system really helps him move. Flea has just recently switched to a wireless system on this tour too and it's working really well for us."

AMPLIFIED TO ROCK

"John uses a Marshall Major 200W amplifier with KT88 tubes and a Silver Jubilee, both stock. The amps are run simultaneously through a BOSS chorus where he goes in mono and it comes out in stereo. So that way whether the chorus is on or not the signal gets split to the two heads. The Silver Jubilee is just a little bit dirty at that volume. "The Marshall Major heads are so hard to find, we've been able to find three and we met a guy named Mike Hill who used to work at Marshall and he told us that they only made around 100 of these amps from 1969-1973. They're special because at 200W you can have it loud and still be real clean. It's basically like a bass amp. John plays so much clean stuff, all of his distortion or overdrive is from his attack on the guitar to the different pedals. If something does go wrong and I have to switch the Marshall head out, then when you put it back you really have to dial in the tone on those things. You can't just mark the numbers on it because the way it's set up with a jumper through the inputs means it has to be exactly right or it'll be too distorted or not punchy enough. You have to turn it up about four times to find the right spot. I'm used to it now."

TECH TIPS

- 1) "I use batteries on a lot of the pedals because they run quieter that way. I test the batteries every day and throw 'em out if there's less than 9.1 volts. I try not to throw out perfectly good batteries because it's bad for the environment. Batteries start at 9.5-9.6 Volts. The MXR micro amp uses hardly any battery at all."
- 2) "I lubricate the nuts and vibratos on both the Strats with a product called Guitar Grease. It's kinda like a wax. I used to use Teflon but this Grease stuff is better. John uses the Tremolo a lot. If I didn't use this stuff John would go through his nuts in no time."

PICK N' MIX

"For picks John uses Jim Dunlop .60mm. They're the orange ones. There's a funny story attached to these picks. The guy that makes them was asking if John wanted a personalised one and John felt kind of funny about that, kind of like it was a little too rockstar-ish, y'know? So when we were in South America we were in an airport and this kid freaked out about the band and then he looked at me and said, You are Dave Lee, guy of John. The story got back to the pick maker guy and he had some picks made up with that on."

RHCPFRANCE - un site redhotchilipeppers ©nicolas 2003

RHCPFRANCE est un site non officiel sur les RedHotChiliPeppers.

The RHCP and logos are registered trademark and copyright of RedHotChiliPeppers.