

BY E.E. BRADMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL ZLOZOWER

Flea

At Your Service

The Red Hot Chili Pepper Moves Ahead By Stepping Back

Contrary to its title, hardly anything on the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *By the Way* is an afterthought. The richly layered textures and

distinctive arrangements recall influences as diverse as psychedelic Beach Boys, Mexican drinking songs, somber Radiohead, and classic punk-funk, each band member adding a patch to the quilt of sound. Vocalist Anthony Kiedis sounds more confident than ever, drummer Chad Smith is reliably funky, and the album is a coup for guitarist John Frusciante, whose contributions are largely responsible for the Peppers' new direction. But Flea—whose outrageous showmanship and superhuman thumb have made him the throbbing heart of the band's musical mayhem—is impressively understated. He continues to refine his quest for bass nirvana by providing his bandmates with a new attitude and a fresh set of tools: He plays with a pick, steps into higher registers, goes fretless, and with a few notable exceptions, barely slaps.

Perhaps his musical experiences outside the Peppers have given Flea new perspective. Besides touring to support the band's 1999 smash album *Californication*, Flea has immersed himself in a Joy Division cover band and studio

Flea continued

sessions with everyone from Johnny Cash and Alanis Morissette to Tricky and "wild-ass drum music" with original Peppers drummer Jack Irons. In the last year Flea has bought an upright bass, began studying jazz theory, and opened a music school in Los Angeles. Who would've known?

Few could have foreseen Flea's current sound in the late '80s, when the Peppers ruled the hearts of millions of fans with their signature punk-funk style and over-the-top stage antics. On the band's first four albums—*Red Hot Chili Peppers* (1984), *Freaky Styley* ('85), *Uplift Mofo Party Plan* ('87), and *Mother's Milk* ('89), Flea mixed the thumping innovations of Larry Graham and Louis Johnson with his own style built on punk-rock abandon. On *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* ('91), Flea had already begun to forsake slapping for more melodic fingerstyle, and 1995's *One Hot Minute* and *Californication* were further proof Flea and the band were growing and changing. "The excitement and momentum of the band is better than it has ever, ever been," he says. "When we got back together with John for *Californication*, it was a real rebirth. For this album, we improvised within the structure of the songs, but it was more about trying to write really good pop. We spent five days a week for a year writing, fixing, and arranging songs, trying this and trying that." As a result, Flea's approach is more streamlined and functional.

"The bass playing on this record is about helping Anthony and John express themselves. It's great to watch Anthony keep growing after 20 years in the band, and so much beautiful music is just bursting out of John. May it go on forever!"

Flea, who turns 40 this year, continues to push his own boundaries, too. "The only way I'm going to keep growing and changing is to be vulnerable as a human being. People I admire—musicians who have remained relevant throughout their entire lifetimes—seem to be the ones who age with dignity and who have love in their hearts. That's my goal."



Why did you start playing with a pick?

I was ready to do something different. I started playing with picks at our jams, and then I had to get my pick chops together with Jane's Addiction because the songs called for it. Eventually, I tried one on *Californication*'s "Parallel Universe," and when John brought in the chord structures for *By the Way* it just made sense for me to try a more melodic pick approach.

I always want to play melodically, even if I'm playing percussive funk—but when I'm playing with a pick, I'm more likely to strum chords or use double stops. Bass lines take on a different type of melody with a pick. Playing a high pick

part over simple chords gave songs like "Zephyr" a nice effect, and with Anthony singing his vocal melody, it makes for a really nice pop chorus.

Who do you consider the expert on melodic pop bass?

Paul McCartney. Most Chili Peppers songs have started with the bass, but for this album, John came in with complete song structures. Someone told me that the bass lines were often the last thing to go on Beatles records, so I decided to try that approach and re-record my bass line on "I Could Die for You," the one song I play fretless on. I played something first that sounded good, but after the vocals went on I heard something different. I'm not saying that's a better way to do it, but it made me play differently.

The album's tambourines, organs, and multi-tracked harmonies are also reminiscent of the psychedelic '60s.

John has been in a very focused, creative, ambitious place. When we were going in to make this record, he studied old pop music and doo-wop, and he overdubbed lots of vocals, guitar parts, and synthesizers—he went for it. I was like, Dude, go on and do it! I'm just happy to be there and do the right thing for the songs.

Were most of the songs born out of jams?

Every song is different, but most start that way. Sometimes I come in with a bass line or John brings in a guitar part. After we decide it's worth building a song around, we'll jam on it. Take

Flea continued

"Universally Speaking," which began as a pretty bass line with a nice droning feel. As soon as we started jamming on it, Anthony came up with a vocal melody. We thought, Wow, we could do something with that—let's make it a real song by adding a chorus. Then John and I did a "face off": We looked at each other, went out to the rehearsal studio parking lot, and sat in different corners. We had five minutes to come in with parts.

How do you decide which one to use?

John came in and played his part, and I was like, Whatever I did wasn't as good as that! [Laughs.] We thought both parts were cool, so we made one the chorus and one the outro. Boom—song done.

What impact does producer Rick Rubin have on your bass lines?

We've come to trust him a lot. Rick thinks so differently than us—we'll play something and it'll mean so much to us, but to him everything's changeable. The Mexican-style "Cabron" is a good example. John wrote it on acoustic guitar. I played what I thought was an authentic Mexican bass line, but no one liked it; they liked my second idea better. When we recorded it, though, Rick didn't like my second idea. So I played every bass line I could think of—anything you could do over those changes, I did.

Later on, we came back to that tune. John and

Flea's Listening List



Peter Hook: "John Frusciante and I had this Joy Division cover band a year and a half ago. We played only one show, but the music really affected me—it's simple but so classic and beautiful. 'She's Lost Control' [from Joy Division's 1979 LP *Unknown Pleasures*] is a classic Peter Hook bass line. It has such a nice, trancey feeling, and the bass is almost like a guitar. I've always loved Joy Division, and the

Red Hot Chili Peppers starting moving in a direction where it made more sense for me to play like Hook."

Tom Jenkinson: "What a great bass player. I heard a couple Squarepusher records, and then I just cleaned off the shelf at Tower."

Jah Wobble: "Jah Wobble is an unsung hero. As the bass player for the first incarnation of Public Image Ltd., his lines were melodic and simple but unlike anything I'd ever heard. He brought reggae bass lines to punk music. He is a huge influence on me—I'm always copping his shit."

Sara Lee: "I used to love Robert Fripp's *League of Gentlemen* ['81, EG]. Sara Lee plays bass all over that thing. After we heard that record, everyone in my band tried to sound like that."

Bill Laswell: "I was still in high school when I saw Laswell play with Massacre at the Whiskey in 1980. It was incredible. He was hitting the bass with a stick, playing chords, and doing his whole thing. He was so awesome and wild. After we saw Massacre, we were really trying to play weird stuff. Those guys were out of their minds!"

Elderly
INSTRUMENTS

BASSES – new, used, and vintage! Plus guitars, amps, books, videos, CD's, accessories, and more.

Call today for your **FREE CATALOG**, or check us out on the **World Wide Web!**
www.elderly.com

1100 N. Washington
PO Box 14210-BP
Lansing, MI 48901 USA
(517) 372-7890
fax (517) 372-5155

ALL PARTS
America's Premier Guitar & Bass Parts Supplier

GET IT RIGHT!
right part
right fit
right price

Trade Dress Trademark Licensed to ALL PARTS MUSIC CORPORATION by Fender Corporation, 13007 Alton Road, Encinitas, CA 92024

Flea continued

I jammed on it, and John suggested that I play his '60s Vox bass with a capo. He figured that playing with a capo would make me see the neck differently, and he was right. By trying something different, I came up with something we liked.

It's a treat to hear you stretch out on "Don't Forget Me."

I played a simple pick part all the way through except for the fuzz solo in the chorus, which I improvised over several takes. On one take, I did a run that John liked, but when he asked me to do it again a week later, I couldn't remember it. The funny thing is, he could play it note for note. So there's one bitchin' bass fill on there that's John.

What gear did you use for the recording?

I used the Vox on "Cabron," and I'm playing a fretless, either a Music Man or a Fender Jazz, on "I Could Die for You." I played my pink, matching-headstock '63 Fender Jazz Bass on some of the stuff, but I don't think any of it made it onto the album. Otherwise, it's pretty much all the Modulus Flea Bass. I didn't use any effects; I was going to borrow a distortion pedal for "I Could Die for You," but I got the best sound by playing my Modulus through a cranked-up Marshall. On the road, I use Gallien-Krueger 2001RB heads and RBH series 4x10 and 1x15 cabinets. [Flea also uses Monster Cables, GHS medium-scale Boomers, and Boss ODB-1 Bass Overdrive, MXR M-133 Micro Amp, and Electro-Harmonix Q-Tron pedals.] I take the Modulus to sessions.

What have been some highlights of sessions you've done?

I just did a few songs on Ziggy Marley's new record, and the songs were beautiful. I was blown away. Man, it was such a groove to play with [drummer] Steve Jordan! I'm also really proud of what I played on [keyboardist] Greg Kurstin's *Action Figure Party*. That was different for me; Gary Novak was syncopating on the drums all over the place, and the *one* was not evident. I did Jewel's record, *Spirit*, because she's my friend. I also had fun recording Bill Withers's "Use Me" with Mick Jagger on *Wandering Spirit*. That's a great bass line, by the way, with a weird harmonic that most people don't know about. [Melvin Dunlap played on Withers's 1972 Columbia LP *Still Bill*.] Jimmy Boyle, who was doing production on Alanis's first album, is a friend of mine, so I played on it as a favor to him, and one of the songs turned out to be "You Oughta Know." I played on her new album, too.

How did you get to record with Johnny Cash?

Rick Rubin asked me to play on Cash's cover of the Charlie Haden song "Spiritual" as played by Spain—the band with Haden's son Josh on bass. I tried to stay true to the slow, beautiful feel by being minimal: one note every four beats, and no fills. I was happy to do it, and it was an amazing experience. Johnny Cash's voice is incredible; the walls were vibrating with the depth of his soul.

A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

With the Red Hot Chili Peppers: (on Warner Bros.) *By the Way*, *Californication*, *One Hot Minute*, *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*; (on EMI) *Mother's Milk*; *The Abbey Road EP*, *Uplift Moto Party Plan*; *Freaky Styley*, *Red Hot Chili Peppers*. **With Action Figure Party:** *Action Figure Party*, Blue Thumb. **With Gov't Mule:** *The Deep End Vol. 1*, ATO. **With Alanis Morissette:** (both on Maverick) *Under Rug Swept*, *Jagged Little Pill*. **With Jewel:** *Spirit*, Atlantic. **With Johnny Cash:** *Unchained*, Universal. **With Mike Watt:** *Ball-Hog or Tugboat*, Sony. **With Mick Jagger:** *Wandering Spirit*, Atlantic. **With Tricky:** *BlowBack*, Hollywood. **With Banyan:** *Anytime at All*, Virgin. **With Jane's Addiction:** *Kettle Whistle*, Warner Bros. **With Porno For Pyros:** *Good God's Urge*, Warner Bros. **With Cheikha Remitti:** (both on Absolute) *Sidi Mansour*, *Cheikha*. **With Sir Mix-A-Lot:** *Chief Boot Knocka*, Sony. **With Young MC:** *Stone Cold Rhymin'*, Delicious Vinyl/Rhino.

You keep showing up in movies. Is there a relationship between acting and bass playing?

They're completely different [laughs]. Acting is about being someone else; bass playing is about being me. People ask me to be in a movie once in a while, and if I like it, I do it.

Any interest in producing?

I'd love to produce and do film soundtracks, but I'd want to give my all to it. There are a few other things I want to do first. Right now, I'm working on upright bass and piano. For now, just being the Chili Peppers bass player is a big job—it's a whole lifestyle, and it's enough for now.

How would you evaluate your playing style?

It's pretty simple, and it always has been. So far I've relied on emotion and intuition, which has served me well, but there's a lot more to learn. By the time we finish this tour, I want to be able to sit in with any jazz band and play standards. I'll have a lot of time to practice in hotel rooms. I'm bringing the upright on tour, and I'll probably take a keyboard, too. I know that to be able to play good jazz bass lines, I have to get into chord theory.

My life is my bass playing, and my art is who I am. I have toured incessantly, giving my heart to everything I do for the past 20 years with this band. It's been the most rewarding when I've done it purely for the sake of bringing something beautiful into other people's lives.

What general advice do you have for today's bassists?

Play all the time and practice all the time. Listen to what's going on, and be supportive of what you're hearing. Go beyond aesthetic and style and get into the substance of bass playing, because the right bass part can make or break a song. **BP**

See Lesson, page 58

