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Funky monks guitar lesson

Many thanks to Invisible Movement for letting us use their transcript “This is not a commercial studio,” says John Frusciante as he ascends the creaking staircase. Right—as if anyone could mistake the ramshackle Spanish-style mansion for a conventional recording facility. “We rented the place for a few months and moved in our own gear. It cost the same as if we’d gone into a regular studio.” “The house is haunted,” adds the guitarist. He indicates a candle-lit alcove off the second-floor landing. “I was sleeping right here about a week after we moved in, and I heard the sound of a woman having sex, but there was definitely no woman in the house. And other people who worked on the project have seen things.” The beautiful but decaying hacienda in Hollywood’s Laurel Canyon has been the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ home for the last two months. “We sleep here, eat here, and every day we just wake up and start recording,” says John. “It’s a chance not many artists get—to not have to think about bills, answering phones, or shaking hands we don’t feel like shaking.” Frusciante leads the way through a huge parlor, stopping to strike a single chord on a piano that probably hasn’t been tuned since talkies came in. As the sour notes echo against the bare walls and hardwood floor, he outlines the band’s recording procedure: “We all play together facing each other downstairs in the living room. The board is in the next room over, and we mike all our amps down in the basement.” John indicates a cement deck on the grassy hillside behind the house. “That’s where we recorded our rendition of Robert Johnson’s ‘They’re Red Hot.’ We ran cables up there, and Chad played drums with his hands. I think our version is almost as freaky by today’s standards as Johnson’s version was by his.” The tour concludes in Frusciante’s bedroom, bare except for mattress, ghetto blaster and CDs, a few of John’s paintings and scribbles on the wall courtesy of bassist Flea’s young daughter. “I recorded the acoustic guitars right here, and Anthony does all his vocals from his bedroom. Instead of looking through a window at three sweaty guys frowning in the control room, we’re looking out at trees and flowers.” Judging by the assortment of rough and final mixes I heard, simple, well-focused living and a no-nonsense producer have done wonders for the Chili Peppers’ music. The band’s fifth album (tentatively titled Blood Sugar Sex Magik) is a giant step forward for the group, a record that’s paradoxically rawer yet more sophisticated than any of the Peppers’ previous work. Producer Rick Rubin’s unapologetically blunt approach makes no concession to prevailing rock production strategies. He captures all the blood and sweat of real musicians pounding the hell out of their instruments. The true-to-life instrumental tones aren’t pumped up with digital steroids, and every song blasts from the speakers with naked, soulful ferocity. But for all its audio vérité viciousness, the new material boasts a new level of ensemble sensitivity. Once-hyperactive parts have been pared down, revealing remarkable interplay and dynamics. Flea, 28, largely abandons his trademark jackhammer slapping for fresh, understated lines, while John reveals a mature, egoless style that belies his 21 years. For the first time, the Peppers scale the heights of funkiness attained by their longtime models, groove bands such as P-Funk, the Meters, and Sly & The Family Stone. But the Chilis haven’t sacrificed their over-the-top humor and intensity. The Peppers may now be the foremost practitioners of that near-extinct species, body music that moves to a human heartbeat. “Nothing was recorded to a click,” insists Flea, and it shows: the group’s organic tempo fluctuations and near-telepathic polyrhythmic interplay evoke the great groove traditions of the ‘60s and ‘70s, but with a relentless ‘90s edge. Those who have previously dismissed the Chili Peppers as abrasive, unmusical clowns are in for a big surprise: Rick Rubin’s Multi-Culti Attitude Few producers have had their fingers in as many stylistic pies as Rick Rubin. Besides making hits for an unlikely array of artists, he started his own record company, Def America. The label lost out in the bidding war that followed the Chili Peppers’ departure from EMI, but he remained the band’s first choice for producer. “Rick is a really smart guy,” says Flea. “He’s very clear-headed and has a good, open-minded view of pop music. Our music is very multi-cultural, and he has many cultural influences himself. After all, he’s produced Run D.M.C., L.L. Cool J, Slayer, the Beastie Boys, and the Bangles. And he just seems to have a natural understanding of what kids like.” Rubin took a break from mixing the Chili Peppers to discuss is iconoclastic production philosophy. Your records often seem like acts of rebellion against current big-budget production styles. I don’t listen to the radio or most records that come out today—I just don’t like the way they sound. I’d rather listen to the Beatles, the Doors, or Led Zeppelin. What’s wrong with new records? Technology has taken over on modern records, whereas older records were great performances. I view my role as having more to do with preparing arrangements and getting the best performances out of my artists than with being a great engineer. A lot of my old favorites, like the Jan & Dean and Beach Boys records, have people singing out of tune or coughing, but they sound great! The technical side is the least important thing to me. Your attitude differs from that of Bob Rock [profiled last month]. He and Metallica spent months getting sounds. We’re very opposite producers. I don’t spend a lot of time getting sounds because mikes in front of amps sound pretty much the same anywhere. The sound really comes from the player’s fingers. I just want to hear my artist play his instrument, even if it doesn’t sound technically perfect. What was your role in pre-production? I started working with the Chili Peppers seven months before we went into the studio. I was involved in songwriting and arranging. A lot of what I do is structural, having to do with turnarounds, getting in and out of choruses, putting in space—whatever it takes to make a song sounds like it’s not just parts strung together. You’re no fan of reverb. We’ve mixed 15 Chili Peppers songs so far, and I don’t think we’ve used any reverb yet. It’s amazing how dry and personal this record is. What you hear is what you get—there’s not a lot of trickery. A lot of people want the biggest sound, with wall of guitar and huge drums. But I don’t think those things matter. Why not? Because the “newest sounds” have a tendency to sound old when the next new sound comes along. But a grand piano sounded great 50 years ago and will sound great 50 years from now. AC/DC’s Highway to Hell came out 12 years ago but could have been recorded yesterday. Same with the Zeppelin stuff. I try to make records that have that timeless quality. And as time goes on, I find that I like the organic sound of everyone playing together in the same room, facing each other. If you don’t worry about the perfection of individual parts or perfection of sound, you get the best performance. Getting Small John: I’m so psyched! This is the fastest we’ve ever done a record. We zipped right through the basics, 25 songs. We were tight as hell—we totally got inside each others’ heads and became one being. Our music is so much more colorful than in the past, and I’m so happy about it. I never took anything so seriously in my life. Flea: John is playing much freer and thinking less. I loved John’s playing on Mother’s Milk, but now he’s so pure and spontaneous. He never considers doing something again and again—he’ll just record maybe one overbub. He likes capturing the natural feeling on tape. John: Almost all the solos are first takes and some of them were cut along with the basics, like “My Lovely Man” and the first solo on “Funky Monks.” On “Funky Monks” I played everything without a pick, even the solo. I’ve been playing that way more and more lately—in fact, I haven’t used a pick in weeks now. The “Funky Monks” solo is very rhythmically free. John: Yeah, I was thinking “rubber band.” I’ve gotten more into those kinds of rhythms, because they sound more natural than really straight stuff. The second part of the solo is one of the few fast parts on the album. I thought of it as a parody of a rock star solo. The intro has electric guitars not plugged in, just miked acoustically. It’s the same thing Dave Navarro of Jane’s Addiction does on “Been Caught Stealing,” though Snakefinger did it first. Flea’s playing is much more subtle. There’s more groove, less flash. Flea: I consciously avoided anything busy or fancy. I tried to get small enough to get inside the song, as opposed to stepping out and saying, “Hey, I’m Flea, the bitchin’ bass player.” I can play fast things that make bass players say “Wow!” but it’s better to imply your technique with something simple. John: You can get just as many “wows” that way. And after you’ve heard a million bass players rip off Flea’s slap thing, what’s the point of continuing to do it? Flea: I hardly slap at all on the new record, aside from “Naked in the Rain.” You know, I was reading this Bass Player interview with Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth, who I really respect. She said she loved funk bass but hated the way white guys play it, because they’ve turned it into this macho-jock thing. As I read that, I knew I was responsible for that tendency. But on the new record I don’t do any of that—I try to play simply and beautifully. And I hope she doesn’t hate me, ‘cause I think she’s great. Having a relatively stable lineup seems to have benefited your music. Flea: Between our first record [The Red Hot Chili Peppers] and our second [Freaky Styley], our guitarist and drummer quit. Between the third album [The Uplift Mofu Party Plan] and the fourth [Mother’s Milk], Hillel Slovak, our guitarist and dear friend, died [of a drug overdose]. This was the first time we’ve made two albums with the same band. John: No—Mother’s Milk was Anthony Kiedis, John Frusciante, Chad Smith, and Flea; this album is the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It’s an entity made by the four of us jumping out of our bodies into a cosmic swell. We’ve all grown out of love and admiration for each other. The Slapathon is Over Flea’s not the only bassist who’s slapping less. Many groove players seem to be rediscovering warm, early ‘70’s sounds. Flea: That feeling of having just bottom without hearing definite notes came out of what the hip-hop guys were doing with their Roland 808 drum machine. I used to be totally anti-drum machine, because I felt that anything computerized was wrecking music be getting away from pure human emotion. But now I’m amazed by the artistic creativity of someone like [hip-hop producer] Hank Shocklee, who makes these amazing collages that sound so good and have so much emotional value. I’ve learned that it’s all in the artist, not in the tools that are used. Some people are so proud of the fact that they play these screaming macho lead guitars, and they think it’s terrible that someone would use a machine. That’s a really stupid attitude to have, especially since the majority of rock bands—your Wingers, your Poisons—are playing such cynical, corporate, formula music. American hard rock is now one of the driest, stalest forms of music. There are some really great hard rock bands, like Jane’s Addiction, but at any given time 90% of pop music is shit. The mediocre are constantly rewarded for following trends; artists just follow their art and don’t think about trends. Some might call the punk-funk crossover you’ve popularized a trend. Flea: Sometimes I hear music that we’ve influenced and think it’s being taken to a great place. Other times I think people only see the superficial aspects of our band. I influenced a lot of white rock bassists with my athletic-style playing. After our last record all these long-haired metal guys started coming to our shows, and now it’s turned into this whole fast slapathon. John: Axl Rose told us that Guns ‘N Roses had the Chili Peppers in mind when they did “Rocket Queen.” Flea: And Extreme’s “Get the Funk Out” is a huge Chili Pepper rip-off. But it’s so slick and glossy—there’s no dirt in it. It sounds like a studio creation. It’s the most unfunky shit I ever heard. Lightin’ Meets Harpo John: I got into character for this record the same way an actor would prepare for a part. I wouldn’t have anything to do with anything that didn’t involve positive vibrations for the creative spirit of the band. That applied to people as well as things like clocks, garbage cans, and ugly lights. If I knew there was going to be an Arsenio Hall billboard coming up down the street, I’d turn away from it so I didn’t have to see it. I tried hard to expose myself to humor and creativity of all types: film, paintings, music. What music inspires you? John: My favorite guitarists: Eddie Hazel from P-Funk, Robert Johnson, James Williamson of the Stooges, Snakefinger, D. Boon from the Minutemen, Lightin’ Hopkins, Leadbelly, Tom Verlaine, Danny Whitten from Crazy Horse, and Zander Schloss and Dix Denney from TheIonious Monster. But the most important inspiration is undoubtedly Zoot Horn Rollo’s playing on Captain Beefheart’s Trout Mask Replica. If I listen to it first thing in the morning, I’m assure a day of unbridled creativity. What do those players have in common? John: They weren’t thinking about coming off as cool guys—they just played every note like it meant something. A lot of people don’t understand how much it means to just beat the shit out of your guitar; to put every last ounce of energy and spirit into it. You should use it like a paintbrush, not a machine. It’s there for you to express yourself on. Flea: John’s attitude is really pure, a reminder to me of why I started doing this in the first place. He gets the big picture so well, in terms of being able to love John Coltrane and two-chord punk rock with equal fervor. The band’s musical philosophy seems largely based on perceiving those connections. Flea: There are only two categories in music: soulful and non-soulful. Anything that has human emotion and spirit and is played with heart and sincerity is really happening. We can see the beauty in Eric Dolphy, the Ramones, and everything in between. We love anything that has a groove that makes you want to live. If you have an open mind, you can see the beauty in all kinds of music. John: Not just music. Robert De Niro and Harpo Marx have influenced me as much as any guitar player. Think of how De Niro only says things that need to be said. He drops the unnecessary lines and gets his message across with small facial movements. The lesson for a guitarist is that you don’t have to play a million notes, all really loud. And Harpo, the funniest person who ever lived, said everything with facial expressions and noises. Every single gesture really meant something, and all of that translates musically. Flea: The best thing I did to prepare for the record was to lose my phone book and break my foot, both of which happened right when we moved into the house. That helped me concentrate—I had no contact with anyone for a couple of months. John: There are no such things as accidents. Flea: Well, I would have much rather not broken my foot. Sex Machines John: I like to keep things simple. Those MESA/Boogie amps were too hard for me to understand. For most of the basics, I used two Marshalls: a guitar head for edge and a bass head for punch and low end. I split the signal with a DOD stereo chorus pedal. For some overbuds I used a Fender H.O.T. practice amp, but for a lot of parts, even solos, I just went straight into the board. You can get amazing, funky tones that way. In fact, a lot of my distortion is from overdriiving the board. My main guitar was a ‘58 Strat, though I used a Les Paul reissue on a couple of things. I also have a ‘57 Strat, which someone had screwed up by putting on those big stupid frets that everyone uses these days. I vomited and told them to make it fretless. That’s what I used for the “Mellowship Slinky” solo. Some people think those big frets help your vibrato, but I make a point of using as little vibrato as possible, though I might do it more if I had long, pretty black hair. And I didn’t use any whammy bar. That’s a Coral Electric Sitar on “Blood Sugar Sex Magik,” and I used an old Gibson lap steel for the solo at the beginning of “The Righteous and The Wicked.” My acoustic is a newish Martin steel-string. But my favorite guitar in the world is my old, fucked-up Fender Jaguar. The strings are all crusty, and the notes crap out when you bend them. I used it to write most of the music, and I became really attached to it. My only effects were an [Electro-Harmonix] Big Muff and an Ibanez wah. I like the Ibanez because you can make adjustments without taking it apart, and it has a bass setting that sounds more like an envelope filter than a wah. I used that on “Naked in the Rain.” Flea: I started using Music Man basses because they’re good and inexpensive. When I could afford one, I got a Spector, but it kept shorting out. I went back to the Music Mans because they’re so simple and pure, but I’ve had problems keeping their necks straight—I had to constantly adjust them on tour. For this record I wanted something really good for the studio with a variety of sounds, so I got a WAL, which I used for most of the 4-string songs, though I used the Music Man for 5-string and fretless stuff. I still think Music Man basses look coolest. Every amp I’ve ever had breaks. For this album I used a Galien-Krueger head with MESA/Boogie cabinets. I’m not especially into them—they’re just the shit I happen to play through now. There’s no effects except for an old Mu-Tron on “Sir Psycho Sexy” and some envelope filter on a couple of things. I used a combination of mike and direct for most of the album, though I used direct only on a few things. One Doodad—Extra-Large, Please Flea: Remember, we did our first gig as a joke. But the next time we played, there were lines around the block. We got signed really fast. We’d worked so hard on our previous projects—I’d been playing with Fear, and Hillel and Jack Sherman, our first guitarists, were really into their band. What is This? But all these major labels instantly wanted to sign our joke band. We never had a happy relationship with EMI, who put out all our previous records. As soon as we could get off, we did. Everybody wanted us. We got a great deal with Warner Brothers—we all bought houses and shit. I think selling music is beautiful. Sure, art is a totally spiritual thing that you regurgitate just from living, thinking, and breathing. But this is a business world. We make records and videos to promote our products so we can drive around on our buses, make money, and then come home and swim in your pools. The Red Hot Chili Peppers are so popular with kids—they buy our T-shirts, buttons, posters, hats, and if we sold fuckin’ little doodads to hang on their underwear, they’d buy them too. And I love it—it’s so much better than if we weren’t making money. I never dreamed I’d have my own ping-pong table! Some might fear your influence on young minds. Flea: There’s such a wave of redneck right-wing morality sweeping the country. People have said we were sexists for singing “Party on Your Pussy,” or for Anthony making blatant sexual gestures. But if sex is important to someone, they should sing about it. I see nothing wrong with idolizing the female genitalia. But just because we like it doesn’t mean we’re homophobic—it would be terrible if people thought that. But people who are neither right-wing nor sexually uptight might say you promote jock-headed attitudes. Flea: Like when we’re purveying this locker-room, “Fuck you, baby” thing? I’d say they should try to open their minds to everything we’re saying, as opposed to focusing on that one aspect. We delve into spiritual love for the female gender, as well as lustful sexual love. Music is My Monster John: Some guitarists have the idea that there are technical prerequisites to being a great player. But all it takes is the ability to make music with complete abandon and total concentration. Take Lou Reed’s playing with the Velvet Underground—to me that was twenty times better than that of most guys who practice twenty hours a day. As long as you’re excited about what you’re playing, and as long as it comes from your heart, it’s going to be great. Flea: I think the key is the willingness to make the sacrifices to put music ahead of everything. When a musician makes music about his life, the sound of that life comes across on the records, whether it’s Miles Davis or the simplest punk rock. It’s important for every musician to remain humble in the face of music; to remember that you’re nothing more than an insignificant speck, but that music is a huge, monstrous universal thing. We’re all just fortunate enough to be part of it, to feed off of it and feed into it. Well said. Flea: Good, I got lucky. The next week the Chili Peppers bid farewell to the funky hacienda with a huge blow-out. A few days later we meet at Flea’s place to listen to Rick Rubin’s final mixes. (There’s no street number outside—must be the place where the Mercedes with Black Flag and Bob Marley bumper stickers is parked.) Up in Flea’s bedroom the windows are open to a spectacular smogless day, and the music blasts mega-decibel triumphant from the stereo. Flea’s stretched out on the bed, John lazes against the wall. They’re blissed—the mixes are spectacular. “This is really, really, good,” purrs Flea. “It sounds amazing,” nods John. “I’m so fuckin’ happy.”

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