



MUSIC

Back to the Funkture

by ROBIN ROTHMAN

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The Red Hot Chili Peppers have often inspired volatile reactions to change; it’s as if the public who loves them seeks a reason to hate them. “Everything after Hillel Slovak [the original guitarist] died has been shit.” “MTV’s embrace of ‘Knock Me Down’ was a turnoff.” “The jump to Warner Bros. was a sellout.” And their greatest sin to date: replacing John Frusciante with Dave Navarro—redeemed only by Frusciante’s return on their latest release, *Californication*. Whatever.

As talented as Navarro is, I’ve cracked my share of Jane’s Chili Pepper/Red Hot Addiction jokes. After all, the image of stoic Gloom’n’Doom Boy dressing up as a giant lightbulb, or participating in the long-gone nearly naked antics of Socks for Jocks, is downright funny stuff. *One Hot Minute* (1995) was a bit of a bummer, yes. But now fans are calling for a mass denial of the last four years. Bad form.

It’s like a cheap daytime drama plot twist—claiming that the entire season was a dream, that key cast members never really died. Even the band implies the new album is partly a backtrack. With Frusciante back and Rick Rubin producing, the current lineup is identical to 1991’s breakthrough, *BloodSugarSexMagik*. And so, the argument goes, must be the sound, the vibe, the magic.

True, *Californication*’s sweet and slow first single, “Scar Tissue,” recalls “Under the Bridge” like “Taste the Pain” once recalled their cover of Sly’s “If You Want Me To Stay.” The punchy “Get on Top” is a direct descendant of “Suck My Kiss.” But so what? Chili Pepper songs have *always* been inter-album referential patchworks.

Employ the scientific method, with *One Hot Minute* as the variable. Listen to every album sequentially, leaving *One Hot Minute* out; you’ll find moments on *Californication* that just don’t make sense without it. “Savior” has a definite Jane’s Addiction quality, and Frusciante’s guitar solos on “Easily” and “Emit Remmus” aren’t far from Navarro. *Minute* was a wallowing, self-pitying temper tantrum, an emotional breakdown for a band that’s been dealt devastating personal blows and gained strength by coming to terms through their music. *Californication* is a reaffirmation to stand up and fight. Give credit where it’s due: if not for the twisted detour the Peppers took through over-the-top experimentation and loss of control, they could never be where they are now.

Californication chronicles this positive progression—it’s as much a step forward as a look back. Where Anthony Kiedis has traditionally screamed sex, here he practically whispers it. And it’s sexier. Rubin’s more a band-member than ever, as evidenced best by dominant and beautiful multiple vocal tracks on “Californication” and “Otherside.” “Right on Time” and “Parallel Universe” hint at yet another new direction the band might explore—BPM-oriented electroslammers. It’s entirely feasible there’s a little techno style in this self-proclaimed “Organic Anti-Beat Box Band.”

So count me among those happy that the dark days of Dave are behind us. I could easily talk about how he was the most fuckable badass guitarist they’ve had, but I don’t like to mix my adolescent whips-and-chains arty goth bondage fantasies with my funk. And thank God the *fun-lovin’* funk is back. But is it? Flea’s got the full bottom booming on “Purple Stain,” and the first seconds of the disc put their bass in your face. Half of *Californication*, though, is comprised of the singsongy ballads that pissed off Hillel-era fans to begin with. Some say it’s no *BloodSugarSexMagik*; I say it’s no *Uplift Mofo Party Plan*. But it’s a well-written, well-performed, well-produced set of tunes—a perfect balance of the Peppers’ mellow and crazy sides, a great intro for someone who’s not already a fan, and ultimately evidence of the band’s inherent ability to grow and innovate within a realm of music they essentially pioneered.

Wherein lies the real irony of the public’s hypersensitivity to change. More and more, less-talented bands constantly cop the fundamentals of the RHCP metal-punk-funk white-boy-hip-hop hybrid and run away with the fans, fame, and fortune. Note Rage Against the Machine, House of Pain, Cypress Hill, and Korn. Not to mention the most popular band in America for this one hot minute, Limp Bizkit. Who are at least talented (like Kiedis, Fred Durst seems to rap by how words sound)—more than you can say for other popular Chili Pepper offspring like the Inane Clown Pussies.

The extent to which *those* idiots suck defies description. Catchy? Yeah, like crabs if you sit on a public toilet. In *Alternative Press*, Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope of ICP ask, “How can someone write that we suck when a million people disagree?” Well, how can a million people disagree when you suck? Why aren’t these million people listening to the real deal? Funk may be, as the Chili Peppers say, color blind. But it ain’t deaf.



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