

A black and white photograph of John Frusciante, the guitarist of the Chili Peppers. He has long, wavy hair and a beard, and is wearing a light-colored, button-down shirt. He is shown from the chest up, holding a white electric guitar and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

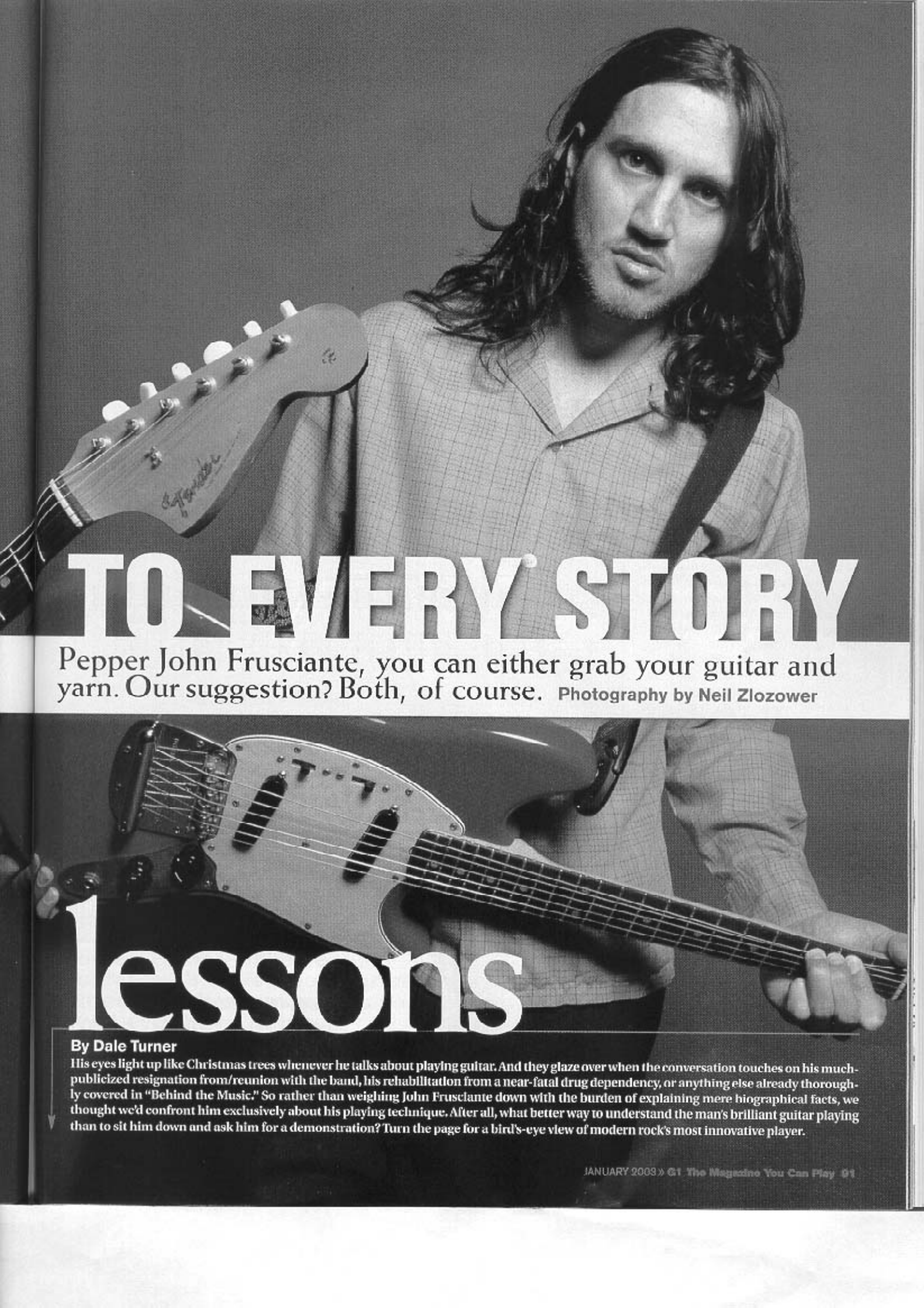
# TWO SIDES

It's reader's choice. With these companion pieces on Chili dive into our red-hot lesson or kick back and enjoy a good

# life

**By Lyndsey Parker**

John Frusciante takes a short break at Hollywood's Swinghouse Studios, where he and his fellow Peppers are rehearsing for a huge South American tour that kicks off in four days. And with time being so precious, the guitarist doesn't want to discuss anything but music. "Oh God, I have to tell that story again?" he grumbles, when asked how he first joined, and eventually quit, the Chili Peppers. "You can just look that stuff up on the Internet—I've told it in about a million interviews. I'd rather talk about other things. [Yet] it's important for me to do interviews for guitar magazines, because I used to love reading them so much when I was a kid." [CONTINUED ON PAGE 98]



# TO EVERY STORY

Pepper John Frusciante, you can either grab your guitar and yarn. Our suggestion? Both, of course. Photography by Neil Zlozower

# lessons

By Dale Turner

His eyes light up like Christmas trees whenever he talks about playing guitar. And they glaze over when the conversation touches on his much-publicized resignation from/reunion with the band, his rehabilitation from a near-fatal drug dependency, or anything else already thoroughly covered in "Behind the Music." So rather than weighing John Frusciante down with the burden of explaining mere biographical facts, we thought we'd confront him exclusively about his playing technique. After all, what better way to understand the man's brilliant guitar playing than to sit him down and ask him for a demonstration? Turn the page for a bird's-eye view of modern rock's most innovative player.

## What might you play to kick off an improv jam with Flea and Chad?

Well, it could be anything. A lot of times it's a chord progression [Fig. 1], or just some groove. Around the time we were writing *By the Way*, I'd always be coming in with chord progressions like that—ones that have a real open, "human" sound to them. Something like that might end up being a section to a song. But sometimes those things don't go anywhere; they just go into the air. And I never remember anything, unless it's a thing I've just been doing. So I use a tape recorder a lot to record ideas.

## What kinds of foundation do players need to get under their belts in order to improvise rhythm parts well?

To me, I think it's important, if you're in any given mode, to see the whole neck as one thing. The important thing is not the scale pattern; it's that those are the notes you could be playing at any given time. It's also important to remember the notes that aren't proper also have a place—whether it's passing notes, grace notes, or just this dissonant 12-tone thing. Once you see it that way, playing chords makes a lot more sense.

It definitely starts with understanding things like 7th, 9th, and 11th chords—chords with a lot of numbers behind them. And it's important to recognize that, much of the time, a chord with five or six (different) notes in it won't make sense when you hear it by itself. That was my mistake growing up, because the only chord book I had was Ted Greene's *Chord Chemistry*. I would hear all these freaky chords and understand, "this chord is called 'this' because it's got these intervals in it," but I didn't know how to use them in context. So I spent a lot of time looking at sheet music, studying music by people who use those interesting chords—like Burt Bacharach, Elton John, and the Beatles. When you open up their songbooks and see they're using something besides minor and major chords, you start to see the way you can use those chords.

For instance, I saw an E7<sup>b</sup>9 chord in a *Fiddler on the Roof* songbook and a Beatles song. If you play E7<sup>b</sup>9 by itself, it's kinda dissonant. But when you go from E7<sup>b</sup>9 to Am [Fig. 2], it makes a lot more sense. By seeing the similarity of the way it was used in both situations, I ended up using it that way in something myself. There are also chords that sound kinda messy when you play them by themselves (Fig. 3A). That's like an E and D chord combined. It's good to go to a Cmaj7 [Fig. 3B] from that. I like using chords that have so many intervals in them that they become kind of a washy texture, not really something somebody would hear and know exactly what it was.

You've mentioned in interviews that you wanted to create guitar parts for *By the*

**Fig. 1** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

♩ = 92

Cadd9 Cmaj7 G/B A13sus2

let ring through

play 2 times

**Fig. 2** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

E7<sup>b</sup>9 Am

**Figs. 3A-B** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

E9sus4 Cmaj7

**Fig. 4** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

Dmaj7A C#7 Aadd9 Bm(add4)E C#add11 Amaj7E

**Fig. 5** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

♩ = 84

Aadd9E Am7E

**Figs. 6A-B** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

A Mixolydian A Major

**Figs. 7A-B** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

A Dorian A Minor

**Fig. 8** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

Moderately

Am7

**Fig. 9A** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

Cm7

Scale tones: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 b7

**Fig. 9B** HEAR IT ONLINE guitaronemag.com

Cm7

Scale tones: 5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5

# JOHN FRUSCIANTE

**Way that would be impossible to figure out.** Yeah, I used chord shapes like this [Fig. 4] for some things, where if I was learning it off the record I would never assume the person was doing that. I didn't want to do things that were obvious, because I played like that on *Blood Sugar* and *Californication*.

**A moment ago you stressed the importance of being able "to see the whole neck as one thing." How would you recommend people go about learning the neck that thoroughly?** Well, I guess the first way is to practice scales and stuff, keeping in mind the important thing is not the scale pattern or how fast you can pick it but how those notes relate to each other and what intervals are being used. Some songs may contain certain bars that call for a major 6th, and with a chord change it may suddenly become a minor 6th. Or maybe something goes from a major chord to a minor chord with the same tonic [Fig. 5]. For the first chord, A Mixolydian [Fig. 6A] would fit nicely. And there's actually no 7th in the chord, so it's pretty much up for grabs; you could make it straight major if you want [Fig. 6B]. And for the minor chord, I'm not playing a 6th [in the chord], so the mode is up for grabs, too [Figs. 7A-B]. The whole point is that those chords are dictating what notes can be played over them.

**A lot of people, when they first learn scales, fall into a trap: They're only capable of play-**

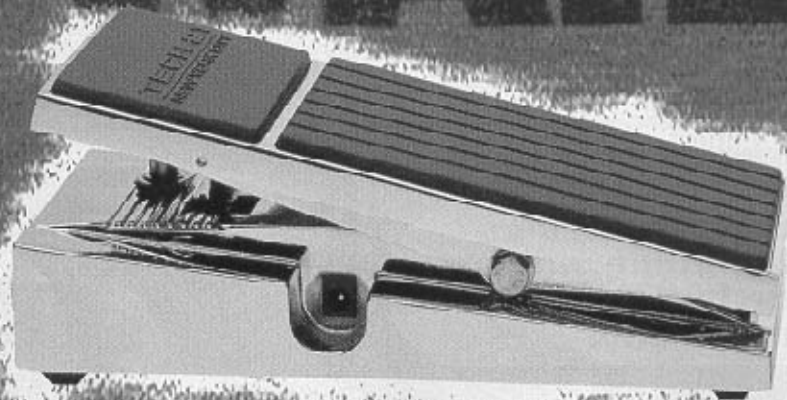
**Figs. 10A-C** HEAR IT ONLINE  
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**Fig. 11A** HEAR IT ONLINE  
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of. It's also a good way of playing by yourself and being entertaining. I think that's probably why I started doing it on acoustic guitar a lot.

**When you improvise, you sometimes create chord shapes out of note pairs, moving them along the neck.**

I might improvise something using different 6ths [Fig. 12]—major and minor 6ths on the D and B strings, with some open strings. It's good to be able to go all over the neck [diatonically] and see the way the 6ths change.

One thing I just thought of is to pick a chord shape and play it all the way up the neck, always fitting it into the scale. You could do it with 7th chords [Fig. 13A], or anything [Fig. 13B]. There, I'm just trying to play some kind of 6th chord.

**You implied a C-G-Am progression using 10ths a moment ago. To further demonstrate how you don't have to just "sit" on the same chord, could you give us a different take on that progression, using the type of Hendrix-like accompaniment you used on certain Blood Sugar songs?**

Okay [Fig. 14]. But I don't do that style as much anymore, just because I don't want to keep repeating myself. Rather than just the "triplets" thing [referring to his treatment of the C chord], lately I've been trying to think of interesting notes to add to chords [referring to his treatment of G-Am].

**Fig. 14** HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 80

C G Am

Let ring throughout

T A B

**Fig. 15A** HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 96

C7(9)

\*w/ partial fretting

T A B

\*Partially fret notes at parentheses; immediately after attack, mute notes with fret-hand finger.

**Fig. 15B** HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 96

C7(9)

T A B

**I recall an interview where Flea mentioned that when you first joined RHCP you weren't muting the strings a certain way with your fret hand when playing single-note funk lines.**

Like doing this [Fig. 15A], as opposed to this [Fig. 15B]? When I was first in the band, I don't think I'd really figured out that type of fret-

hand damping yet. You learn that a lot from listening to old reggae music. Those guitar players are hardly ever pressing down all the way with their fret hands [Fig. 16A]. It's good for funk, too [Fig. 16B]. It's more of a percussive thing, because the notes don't resonate at all; it's all attack.

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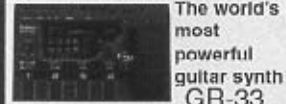
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Fig. 16A HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 76  
Am

\*w/ partial fretting

Fig. 16B HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 96 (♩♩♩♩ - ♩♩♩♩)  
C/F#

Fig. 17 HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 88  
B7#9

\*w/ fingers

\*Pull/release strings with index finger so they snap against fretboard.

Fig. 18 HEAR IT ONLINE  
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♩ = 88  
A5 C5 Eb D F7 E

\*w/ fingers

let ring -----

\*Pull/release strings with fingers so they snap against fretboard.

**When did you get into playing single-note funk lines using a fingerstyle approach?**

Like this (Fig. 17)? I heard Hillel used to do stuff like that; I guess I was just trying to do my own version (Fig. 18). Lately, I've been fingerpicking more because I've been listening to folk music a lot—like Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention. So I've been learning more complex stuff.

**How important was it for you to do all that work in your earlier years—to get all the scales and foundation together?**

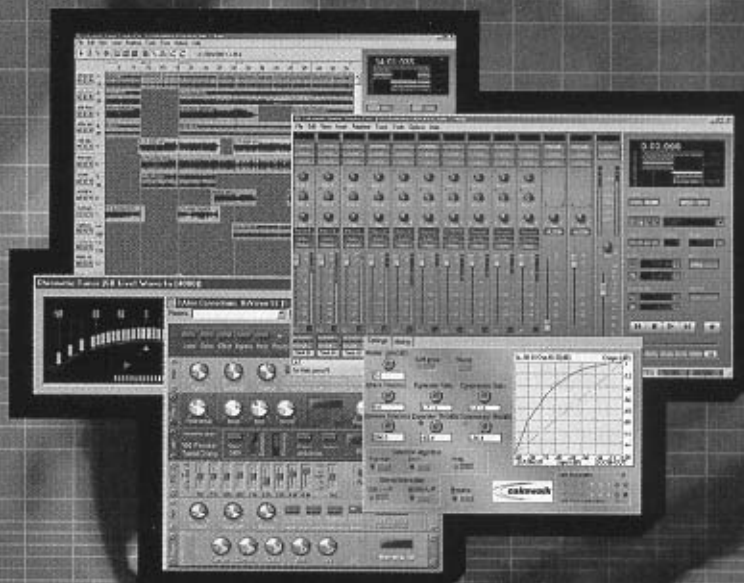
I can't stress enough how important it was. Understanding the way modes work and the way harmony works within the context of modes is infinite; it's not at all limiting.

When I was 20 years old, it hit me like a ton of bricks that no music is ever good because of how difficult it is to play, how it looks on the neck, or how complex it is. But I can use knowledge of theory to my advantage: it gives me the ability to assimilate music into my head, break it down, and turn it into something I can use in my own way. People like Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker, Igor Stravinsky, or Miles Davis? Their knowledge of theory didn't hurt them in any way. I feel very confident that thinking about music from a theoretical standpoint doesn't get in the way of me putting my soul into it.

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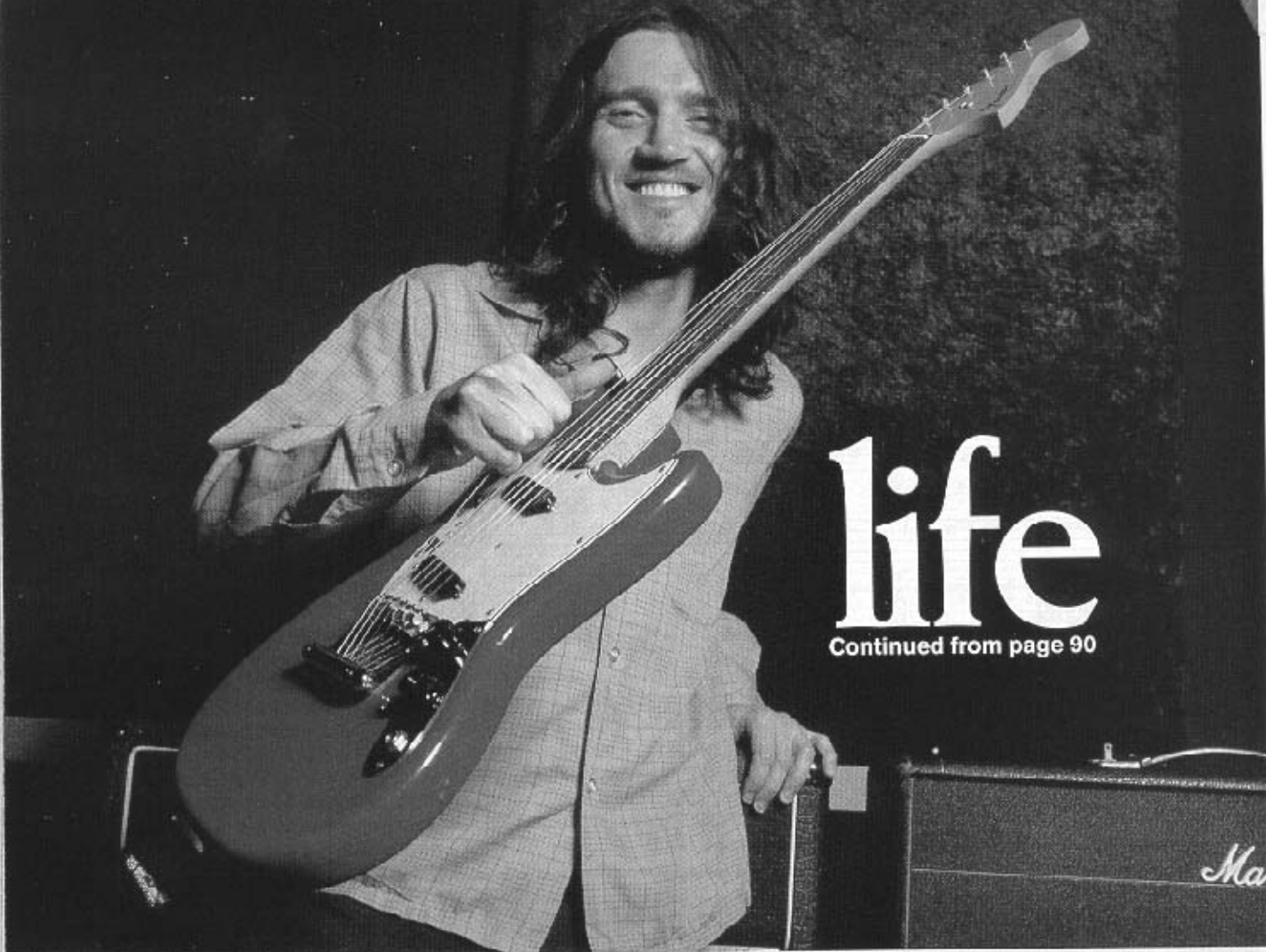
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# life

Continued from page 90

... Fair enough. But for those of you without cable TV who are unfamiliar with the (at times) sordid saga of the Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist, here's a quick recap. Just three years after being blown away by a Chilis performance at L.A.'s Variety Arts Center and becoming a rabid RHCP fan, 19-year-old prodigy Frusciante (the son of a Julliard-trained pianist and an ex-pro singer) joined his favorite band, replacing original member Hillel Slovak, who'd tragically succumbed to a drug overdose. Frusciante had never been in a band before, but he adapted quickly and fit in perfectly; his dazzling play added a whole new dimension to the Peppers' caveman punk-funk and helped them break through to the MTV mainstream with the smash albums *Mother's Milk* and *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*. But then, at the height of RHCP's early-'90s fame, Frusciante became disillusioned and abruptly left the band, less than a month before they were slated to headline Lollapalooza. While the Peppers soldiered on as best they could with a revolving-door lineup of ultimately incompatible guitarists (most notably Dave Navarro of Jane's Addiction, who stuck around just long enough to play on 1995's *One Hot Minute*), a depressed Frusciante retreated to his Hollywood home, where he became a recluse for the next seven years, spending his

days painting, recording two fascinatingly inaccessible solo albums, writing short stories, and cultivating a heroin habit extreme enough to shock William Burroughs.

It seems Frusciante would have learned a lesson from the drug-related deaths of not only his predecessor Slovak but also his good friend River Phoenix (who overdosed at Hollywood's Viper Room while attending a Frusciante gig in 1993), yet he brought the same single-minded dedication to his addiction that he had once brought to his music. But after an alarming article in an L.A. weekly depicted him as a toothless, pockmarked, wraithlike junkie literally on the verge of death, concerned friends staged what was thankfully a profoundly successful intervention, and Frusciante made a turnaround that was nothing short of miraculous. Bassist Flea, who had remained closest to the former Pepper (they occasionally played together in a side project called the Three Amoebas, with ex-Jane's Addiction drummer Stephen Perkins), convinced the cleaned-up Frusciante to rejoin RHCP, which had recently parted ways with Navarro. This restoration of the classic Chilis lineup brought about a major comeback for the once-flooding group, with 1999's 13 million-selling *Californication*.

Okay, that brings us up to date. While the

Peppers' upward trajectory from the proverbial ashes continues apace with their latest massive rock opus, *By the Way*, Frusciante, now 32, seems better equipped to handle success this time around. Today at Swinghouse he rambles a bit (most likely trying to fit as much guitar dialogue as possible into the scant amount of rehearsal down time allotted for this interview), but is otherwise lucid, not the alt-rock Syd Barrett/Skip Spence/Brian Wilson-like *idiot savant* he's often made out to be. He looks healthy, too: Clearly the last few years of total sobriety, healthy eating (today, when ordering his organic takeout lunch, he asks for extra sea vegetables), and Ashtanga yoga practice have worked wonders for him. He comes across as a fiercely focused man who is finally sure of his footing in the band he joined when he was still practically a boy.

"I just feel more confident about molding my own position in the band into whatever I want it to be," muses Frusciante. "In the past, I wrote things that were more the kind of things that I thought the Chili Peppers should play. Now I see the band as more of a free place where I mold and shape and expand my role to be what I want it to be—whether that means using a modular synthesizer, or playing piano or a glockenspiel or the harpsichord, doing a bunch of guitar overdubs, or writing beautiful



chordal things. I just do whatever I want to do now, and everybody likes it. I think more in terms of what I can do that would be interesting with this group of musicians, rather than what I can do that would be cool for the Red Hot Chili Peppers."

Frusciante has certainly come a long way from the days when he was touted as an uncanny Hillel Slovak impressionist. But he insists that aping Slovak's style was never his agenda. "I'll tell you honestly what happened: When I joined, I wanted to find my own style and be my own guitarist, but I could *not* find myself! So after about a year, I said, 'You know what? I'm going to see what happens if I just

**"I've been spending a lot of time furthering my understanding of chords on the guitar, so it got to the point where I felt that in order to truly see chords clearly, I was going to have to learn them on the piano."**

try to play like Hillel.' And the second I did, I started to have a perfect kind of groove with Flea. And unintentionally, because all my musical background was behind it, I gave a different dimension to his sound and built from there. Hillel taught Flea how to play bass


and basically introduced him to rock music, so playing like Hillel was the only place to start, really, if I was to ever have my own style but still gel with Flea's playing. Most people only ever have one person they gel like that with in their life; Flea's had *two*, mostly because as a teenager I dedicated myself to copying other people's styles, and when I chose to copy Hillel's style, I did it *really* well. Then I was able to build that style into a new musical vocabulary for myself, and Flea's playing started changing with mine. It's been growing ever since."

And it's been growing by leaps and bounds. Though Frusciante humbly insists, "Me saying that I'm more responsible than anybody else just makes me look like an asshole," there's little doubt that his sense of artistic adventure is largely responsible for RHC's ongoing shift away from the trademark chest-thumping, bass-slapping machismo-rawk of their freaky-style days. This change in direction has never been so marked, or so welcome, as it is on *By the Way*. In a nu-metal age when their testosterone influence is more prominent than ever, the Peppers have ironically produced the least stereotypically Pepper-y album of their two-decade career, and it is—also ironically—their finest effort yet. A mellow affair lushly layered with overdubs and Frusciante's unexpected keyboard flourishes, *By the Way* is sophisticated, at times downright gorgeous pop (check out "Dosed," a goosebump-inducing vocal duet between Frusciante and frontman Anthony Kiedis), proving that "Under the Bridge" and *Californication* high points like "Scar Tissue" were no flukes. The perennially shirtless, face-pulling, sock-donning, frat-friendly Peppers, who once seemed far too macho and laddish for a sensitive soul like Frusciante, have officially grown up, and it's Frusciante's widescreen vision that's helped spur this evolution.

Old-school fans may grumble at *By the Way*'s relative lack of funk-ed-up party anthems and bad-boy bravado, but RHC's passion for genre-straddling eclecticism hasn't diminished—they're simply finding new genres to straddle, since blending rap and rock isn't exactly fresh or revolutionary anymore. It's this knack for reinvention that puts the Chilis in an elite category with Madonna, U2, and the similarly enlightened Beastie Boys as one of the few acts to emerge in the early- to mid-'80s that is still relevant in 2002. "It's always been the philosophy of the band, which they made clear to me when I joined, that the idea was to do something different and not just repeat what they'd done before," Frusciante explains. "When we're

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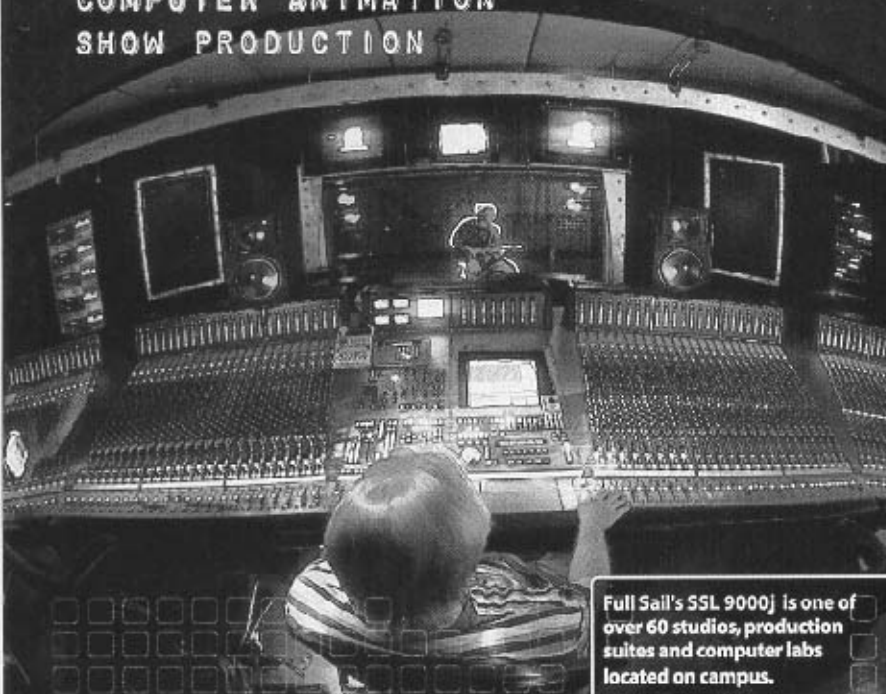
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rehearsing, we play plenty of funk things and stuff, but they don't seem as exciting to us. The stuff that grabs us is the stuff that *isn't* like what we've done before, that sounds new to us."

During the 14 months that the Peppers were painstakingly recording *By the Way* at legendary Sunset Strip hideaway the Chateau Marmont, Frusciante dabbled with all sorts of new ideas, many of which stemmed from his recent fascination with keyboards, which figure prominently on the album. "I've been spending a lot of time furthering my understanding of chords on the guitar, so it got to the point where I felt that in order to truly see chords clearly, I was going to have to learn them on

**"It was very important to me on this record to be very disciplined about not showing up at the studio and playing my automatic blues riffs."**

the piano," he reveals. "But more important for me was my modular synthesizer, which is a great way to learn about sound. For me, sound was very unimportant on *Blood Sugar* and *Californication*. But on *By the Way* it was a lot of fun for me to explore that side of my thinking again, because when I was a little kid, I was really into effects, and guitar players like Andy Summers, Warren Cuccurullo, and

Adrian Belew."


Frusciante also cites Vini Reilly (of obscure post-punk Manchester outfit the Durutti Column) and Siouxsie & the Banshees guitarists John McGeoch and John Valentine Carruthers as influences this time around. Yet one of the guitarists he listened to throughout the making of *By the Way* who had a significant effect on his playing was Michael Rother of '70s Krautrock duo Neu! "He made these wonderful solo albums that are brilliant," Frusciante gushes. "He piles on a ton of guitars, doing harmonies with each other, with beautiful, simple melodies and chord changes."

Frusciante's aforementioned keyboard fixation led him to seek out even more left-field role models. "On this album, it was important for me that my solos not come from the rudiments of the guitar heroes that I grew up on," he begins. "So rather than use people as my models who are actually my favorite guitarists, like Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, I wanted to try an experiment for this record: to use synthesizer players and try to incorporate ideas that I was hearing on electronic records as melodies in my solos. So I'd figure out Autechre or Aphex Twin or Kraftwerk melodies. I was listening a lot to early electronic music, like the Human League's first two records, OMD's first two records, and Heaven 17. Those really were my whole model for the type of soloing that I do on this record. I'm doing bends and slides and things that one does in a solo, but I'm trying not to phrase things in that blues sort of way. It was very important to me on this record to be very disciplined about not showing up at the studio and playing my automatic blues riffs. That's what I've got to do to keep things interesting for myself. I've got to set limitations for myself."

Considering that many Chili Peppers songs develop from jam sessions, such a structured approach seems at odds with the freewheeling band's entire philosophy. "But *that's* what gives the jamming some kind of direction to it," Frusciante stresses. "The other guys definitely just walk in and play whatever they feel like playing, but I feel it's kind of my responsibility within the group to create some kind of limitation and be conscious of where I'd like it to go stylistically. I have a picture in my head, and I don't go along with us doing things that don't fit into that picture." So how does he communicate this picture to his bandmates? Answers Frusciante: "I don't *need* to! They understand that I have my own ideas for how I want my playing to be."


Such unspoken understanding is rare among band members, but Frusciante, Flea, Kiedis, and drummer Chad Smith share such powerful chemistry that their jams yielded a total of 28 possible songs for *By the Way*.

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## JOHN FRUSCIANTE

Frusciante describes their communication as "very telepathic. Whenever I feel like something should happen, they just do it; nobody ever has to tell anybody. Everything just constantly falls into place every time we play together. It's a great feeling. I'm so lucky to be in a band with people as good as Chad and Flea, because their styles lock perfectly with mine. See, there's a thing about hearing the spaces in music, which is kind of what you don't have when you play with someone you've never played with before. To you, what's inside the spaces is implied in the notes you're playing. But somebody else could hear completely different accents in those spaces than what you're hearing, because spaces are technically up for grabs. But for some reason, with Chad and Flea and me, if I play something that has a lot of space in it, they will always come in with the perfect accents. That's a magical thing, which I guess just comes from playing together for a long time."

Frusciante clicks so naturally and intuitively with his fellow Peppers, it must almost feel like he never left the band in the first place ... right? "Oh no, it feels very much like I left!" he maintains. "But I feel closer and more tight with them than I ever did back then, and I know that the only way that could have happened was for me to have left. I also have a clarity now in my brain about what my role is as a musician, and what I'm capable of. Like, I used to take so many things for granted when it came to technique, but now I appreciate every little ounce of technique that I have. When I was 21, I thought the whole thing was to throw away your technique; when I rejoined the band and I hadn't played for five years and my technique was gone, I worked my head off to make it back up to par with what it had been before. And now that I have it back, I don't take it for granted. I'm not going to misuse it and start playing scales all over the place on our records. But the fact that I can look at the fretboard and see where all the notes are—that when I hear Flea play a bassline, automatically these notes just come alive for me all across the fretboard—I am so thankful that I have that."

Surely countless RHCP fans—not to mention Flea, Kiedis, and Smith, his musical soulmates that have welcomed Frusciante back into the fold—are thankful as well. Legend has it that a teenaged Frusciante once attended an audition for Frank Zappa's band but chickened out at the last minute. And while Zappa surely would have appreciated the boy wonder's staggering talent, it's a genuine struggle to imagine Frusciante being a full-time member of any group other than the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Together, the four of them just have that certain *magik*. 