



THE  TIMES

Prickly pepper

By Burhan Wazir

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This writer walks on eggshells to talk to the red hot John Frusciante

THERE IS ONE awkward moment when I arrive at a London hotel room to interview John Frusciante, guitarist with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. “I have been shopping for records,” he beams happily, pointing to several boxes of vinyl that line his bedroom. Then abruptly a dark cloud descends on his composure. “I don’t wanna do the interview here any more,” he announces. And as I place my bag on his bed to fish out my notebook, he scowls. “Don’t put anything on the bed. Please?”

As encounters with Frusciante go, this third meeting — I have interviewed him twice before — has proved immensely productive already. Back in 1999 in Helsinki, the then recently rehabilitated Frusciante still bore all the scars of his drug addiction — blisters and welts on his forearms, and a wispy beard that hid the signs of restorative dental surgery. He seemed more amiable in 2001. Yet even then, as he conceded, “I’m not there yet”.

Frusciante, 33, has every reason to be prickly. When the band’s original guitarist, Hillel Slovak, died after a heroin overdose in 1988, Frusciante, his 19-year-old replacement, took the group to their greatest success with *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* in 1991. He left the following year, though, descending into the kind of druggy existence patented by *Nirvana*’s Kurt Cobain.

He rejoined the group for *Californication* in 1999. “I don’t know if I can keep making music,” he told me then. In 2001, weeks before the release of his third solo record, *To Record Water for Only Ten Days*, he was similarly insistent. “I keep thinking I might go back to the old ways,” he said. Yet last year he completed work on the Chili Peppers’ *By the Way* and a *Greatest Hits* set.

His rehabilitation seems complete on his fourth solo album, however. *Shadows Collide with People* is his most assured work to date. In 18 songs, from psychedelia to ambient chatter and new-wave pop, Frusciante has produced several moments of shimmering beauty and innocence that remind me of the Beach Boys’ post-Sixties rebirth.

“Brian Wilson was actually in the studio when I was making this album,” he says, cheerfully. In a departure from his previous home recordings, *Shadows Collide with People* was assembled at Echo studios in LA, where Wilson recorded *Pet Sounds* in 1966. “I was like a kid,” Frusciante recalls. “He was next door, and a friend and me had our ears pressed to the wall.”

Undoubtedly happier than in our previous meetings, although just as otherworldly in his behaviour, Frusciante seems content only when discussing or playing music. On stage he has often struck me as intensely private, divorced from the playful antics of his bandmates. “I don’t have a partner,” he says, seriously. “I don’t think I ever will have one. I know that I’m not a nice person. Musicians have to be selfish.”

He cites the title of his latest record to illustrate the point. “Well, I do believe in spirits and visions,” he says, recalling an incident in 1997 when he was sitting at home one evening in LA. “My house seemed to change around me. One minute I was sitting there listening to music, and it was California, then I saw all these Africans chanting and dancing around my living room.” Did he speak to them? “I didn’t,” he says, wistfully. “They kept looking at me as if I was out of place. I never saw them again. But I guess the incident has stayed with me.”

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Frusciante tells me he has few hobbies and rarely holidays outside LA. “It’s just about the music,” he says. “When I’m not making it, I’m just happy sitting at home listening to records. There’s so many experiences to be had listening to music. Do you know what I mean?” I leave the room with a nagging suspicion that, with age, Frusciante — obviously revelling in the wonders of his recovery — will find life at home increasingly claustrophobic. He seems unfazed, however. “I’ve been out before,” he says. “And I learnt that the world is not a very nice place.”

Shadows Collide with People is released on Monday through Warners

HOTTEST CHILIS

1984 *The Red Hot Chili Peppers*

1987 *Uplift Mofo Party Plan*

1989 *Mother’s Milk*

1991 *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* becomes a global hit on the back of the single *Under the Bridge*

1995 *One Hot Minute*

1999 *Californication* sells over 15 million copies worldwide

2002 *By the Way* shifts more than 6 million copies in its first four months

2003 Greatest Hits: draws heavily on *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* and *Californication*

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