

**THE COMPLETE SPECULATIVE
RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS
FAN FICTION**



CHASE KAMP

SECOND EDITION

2018

FOREWORD



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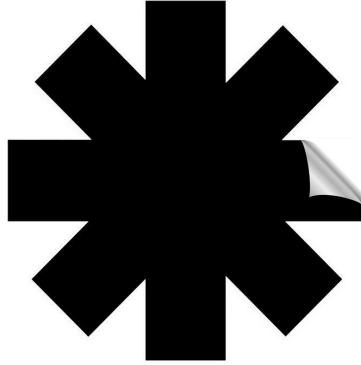
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My love for the Red Hot Chili Peppers was forever solidified in sixth grade when I saw the video for “Scar Tissue” on TV in my grandma’s kitschy timeshare apartment near Mission Beach in San Diego. It was our first family vacation, the first time I ever left Arizona. Also the first time I experienced the ocean, my siblings and I delighted but quickly humbled by its surprising might, the odd short wave hurling us on our asses. We didn’t get any of the music video networks in our religious mountain town—another unanticipated force to behold. “Scar Tissue”, like so many music videos, is a narrative-less depiction of the artist performing and in repose within a narrow, stylized universe. The band drives a jalopy convertible through a desolate desert expanse, squinting and lipsynching and mostly shirtless, and on the last note of the outro, the sun waning, John Frusciante throws an unstrung, hopelessly broken guitar out of the cabin as they drive away. It was hardly the first time I heard RHCP, but that song and video reflected things both legible—familiar heat waves, piles of oxidized scrap, the delirious frame-rate of highway scenery, those slow-burning stretches of time—and ineffable about road tripping, getting lost. Of course the

Peppers themselves, slung with bandages and scrubbed with dust, looked cool as hell. The video was probably the coolest thing I'd seen up to that point, but more importantly it marked the first time I comprehended such a wide matrix of signifiers woven into a pop song: topography, weather, masculinity, regional malaise, universal aimlessness. Hearing the Red Hot Chili Peppers in southern California, on summer vacation, at the cusp of puberty, had the power of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art experienced in ideal conditions.

I am a fan of the Peps, though perhaps not the best one: I am not emotionally devoted to anything they put out after 2004 and, though they absolutely slay live, I'd only pay to see them again in the unlikely event it would cost less than \$85. But they are a lodestar for how I understand and appreciate music, the first time an artist so compellingly illustrated my experience they commanded my entire nervous system.

I'm a fan. I was once a music writer, but not anymore. I gave up on it. I've been a drummer since youth; I learned ghost note syncopation by spinning *Californication* on my Discman and pounding my economy-line Yamaha kit for months in the garage. But when I tried as an adult to learn guitar I gave up on that too. This zine is a document of these failures.



I feel fortunate to have lived out some version of a dream hatched in high school after my newspaper teacher sat me down and said my album reviews showed potential (I must have slagged the Linkin Park/Jay-Z mashup album with notable composure). This and a few other encouraging nudges led me to study journalism in college, and soon after graduating I scored a freelance gig with the Phoenix alt weekly, sometimes writing features but mostly getting into shows for free and immediately spending \$15 on drinks, the exact amount I'd be compensated for the concert review. This was the extent of the prestige—save for the time Father John Misty live-shitposted one of my thinkpieces—but I was satisfied having a tiny part in the critical conversation I consumed every day, one that found nourishing language for those all-encompassing experiences of sound. Sitting in my desk chair, I finger-picked my shitty Squier Strat that a luthier friend retooled to play left-handed like Hendrix, the tuning pegs pointed down.

But my desire grew just as my abilities hit a ceiling. I was dying for a chance to sit down with the artists instead of doing awkward phoners, to be the one to decode, to decrypt, to champion emergent movements. To earn those

opportunities, to be a truly fine writer, I needed to become scholarly. I needed to file copy on music I didn't particularly care for, to earnestly study its lineage and address it on its own terms. My inbox filling with garbage PR blasts, I grew weary of rock's conventions, struggling to find new adjectives for guitar tones. Worse, my fingers would not intone properly on the frets.

Soon the music editor at the alt weekly was due to leave his post. He was a friend, a fellow culture hoarder who'd also escaped an evangelical Walmart town. He said he'd throw my hat in the ring if I was interested. A chance at being an actual gatekeeper, having an actual music media job—isn't that what I wanted? But I was lining up a move to the west coast. Like Anthony Keidis, I found California a boundless muse.

I declined the offer. I didn't hesitate, but the implication was hard to face: I wasn't good enough at something I'd spent years practicing, wasn't willing to do what it might take to get there. And I thought about the guitar, all the ways it escaped me.



Can't lie: this zine started as a joke. I got to Oakland in the summer of 2013 and knew I wanted to write a short fiction collection but kept tripping over my own expectations. I found relief in posting psychedelic Red Hot Chili Peppers mini-epics on Facebook.

John Frusciante plays a guitar solo at the edge of matter and consciousness. Each note fractures quantum fields and dulls the curvature of spacetime, colliding to form a new dimensional tapestry. "Dude," says The Universe, "what do you call that one?" John Frusciante speaks through pure sub-molecular energy: "Haven't thought of a title yet."

Halfway into a bottle of two-buck Chuck, a Red Hot Chili Peppers fan fiction started to sound like a perfectly insipid exercise. I gave myself permission to go off like Brent DiCrescenzo in his absurd reviews from the early days of *Pitchfork*, the ones I read in newspaper class when I should have been inverting pyramids. As usual, easing the pressure helped generate pages. And once sober, something larger resonated. I felt obligated to do legitimizing research. I checked out the Kiedis autobiography, logged in to Wattpad, not yet knowing to what end.

Let me reiterate that RHCP are a monstrous live act. It was in high school when I saw them at Economy-Line Cellular Provider Amphitheater,

somehow holding hands with a girl for the first time, a girl with whom I'd become acquainted two hours prior, just before she took the stage to dance in a bunny costume during The Flaming Lips' opening set. RHCP kindled me just as profoundly. They operated so comfortably in the jazz/big band funk tradition of stretching solos, improvising on themes, vamping for as long as it felt good, dabbling in dissonance and blind left turns, to then deliver the radio hooks without fail. Beyond soundtracking my late bloom, I think they occupy a fascinating space in the canon at large. Cartoonish yet disciplined, they at once embody and refute every imaginable criticism of mainstream rock music. They are adjacent to L.A. hardcore and have beef with Mr. Bungle. Even if they're not your thing—even if you actively hate them—they are a force to behold.

My research only uncovered the answer to one question: what is fan fiction? A foremost commitment to projecting the author's desires. RHCP was the perfect band on which to project mine. Here, each of the boys represents a piece of my longing (perfection, transcendence, indulgence, catharsis). I stopped doing research and focused on my loss. I wrote this zine to reckon with an eliminated life path, my love for rock music mostly extinguished, and couldn't let the dream die without a stunt.

This zine started as a joke and became an elegy, one last thinkpiece. The guitar music sphere, though officially dethroned as the primary outlet of pubescent melancholy, grows increasingly rich with yet unseen vulnerabilities and non-white, non-dude narratives—how will RHCP be remembered? The algorithms replace music journalism's function as a consumer guide, the platforms funneling everything into a chalky paste of "content"—what does that mean ten years from now? This zine seeks to imagine. It gives me a chance to mourn a few efforts and neatly bow out—and to do so at no one's expense.

Make no mistake: I am a fan. I brought this zine on tour backing up my friend Stephen in Europe a few years ago and winced a little when this guy in Hamburg who'd just bought a copy described it to his friend as a "piss-take". I take the piss out of no one but myself. This is me fantasizing at dusk. See me windswept in a familiar desert heat, shredding a guitar with no strings and chucking it to the blacktop, each of my boys in tow.



This zine is called the "Complete" edition because early on I did a small run of just the first two chapters before the third was finished, and also to be a self-aggrandizing turd.

Have to thank Allison Cardon, Alexis Morgan and Stephen Steinbrink for their generous support and guidance. My friend Laura Henriksen somehow spent a weekend partying at Rick Rubin's mansion and shared fabulous intel. My dude James Roemer kindly designed the RHCP logo with the Warholian peel. Joshua Amberson at Antiquated Future has been the best cheerleader and distributor. Thank you, friends.

Special and eternal gratitude to Edmond Lapine for being an early appreciator of this zine, Micah Danemeyer for the shows he hosted around town, and all the other souls taken from us in the Ghostship fire.

Chase Kamp
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RED HOT CHILI PARENTS

JOHN FRUSCIANTE PRACTICES his nightly forty minutes of meditation before taking a magnesium-B12 supplement, brushing his teeth and lying down next to Josie-Ray, who is asleep on her stomach with her hands bound behind her in nylon rope. He is roused by his alarm at 5:15 a.m. He turns on his bedside lamp and silently slips open his dream journal without rising. He struggles to transcribe:

Doing a high-stakes chemistry experiment for good scientists, it wasn't like R&D for some company, it was the good guys. But the Bunsen burner was calcified. The microscope had this repeating .GIF inside, Flea saluting from a falling glider, over and over. Kept moving to adjust goggles I wasn't wearing. My notes were doomed so I opened a spreadsheet on the computer, the data had a topography, cornrows and tundra. I got distracted online. Felt pangs of embarrassment for the President, I saw him commit too deeply to a thread on Facebook. I combined all the compounds and elixirs with faked panache, it resulted in tap water and lye. But the good guys cheered. They threw chairs. I was furious. For winning their praise without really trying?

Frusciante digs toward the visions but they vaporize. Josie-Ray stirs. He slips the knot loose with a pull and she calibrates herself before pulling out her own sleep ledger. He wants to blame the magnesium for not working to enhance his vividness, but he knows he is overreaching. Today he's going to continue his salvia divinorum explorations and is succumbing to fear of the realm.

John Frusciante was turned on by a colleague from NA, an accomplished studio bassist with no public profile, who said her month of salvia trials gave her maximum clarity. If smoked, the highly-psychoactive plant immediately conjures about ninety seconds of incomprehensible time-corrosion

and dissociative detonation, ejecting the user back to the reality plane just as quickly without any hope of true internalization. He has been doing as the bassist recommended, slowly chewing small doses and entering the salvia space with much more time to amble and examine. He had toyed with psychedelics plenty, but the continued self-repair he felt after finally becoming a sponsor, unpacking his recovery for the benefit of others, led him to like the idea of karmic atonement for past abuses, to initiate a respectful, benign relationship with an unfamiliar and elusive substance, entering altered states to seek and receive raw truths instead of evading them. This purity, he hoped, would demystify his songwriting troubles and give him the confidence to end his indefinite hiatus from the industry. He had tried to descramble his approach, folding meditative techniques into his already vigorous rehearsal regimen. He still felt he wasn't coming close to reaching his own transcendent musical plane, something beyond the Red Hot Chili Peppers, beyond pop, beyond vibrating oxygen.

His want for a psychic trial was met: salvia proved formidable. The initial output was confusing, lots of false leads and emotional misdirection, hubris projection and ego blockage. But he can feel progress being made. Corridors once felt at the edges are being illuminated, plastic energies turning to cold brass. Josie-Ray helped him to intersect his dream-state revelations in the mix. Yet he still feels like an astral tourist, unprepared for a definitive confrontation. His vocabulary has been faltering at key peaks. Inside the sphere he hasn't yet heard a sound.



It is only on vacation when Chad Smith can even begin to tolerate shopping. The mall's skylight ceiling permits the Miami sunshine to recoil off the enamel of every surface, forcing him to put on his Oakleys. He sees stores he's never heard of, sterile showrooms with very little merchandise on display, feeling he could have guessed their preferred clientele by the jags of their logos. His new girlfriend Traci has examined and frowned up eighteen different specimen of cyborg amphibian running shoes, which is just fine because he thinks Traci is a knockout with a megaton heart. Tour life had been cresting into repetitive spectacle now that he'd reached his late fifties, making him feel like an obscenely paid stunt double, an obscure knight. He thinks of Traci like a legendary horse, entering his life without warning and laying claim to a scary and necessary part of his soul. He found she was cosmopolitan but with fierce Midwestern integrity, a highly-advanced judo drunk who put his skills to

shame. She appreciated his achievements not as some magical anointment but the result of decades of ass-busting and not repeating mistakes. He appreciated her unprecedented patience.

Traci seizes a chunky jewelry set with carved black pewter. "Aren't these earrings such a moment? Aren't they so Newport Beach farmer's market?"

"You want me to get them?" Chad Smith says.

"Baby, no, I was being sarcastic. They're for vampire stepmothers. I'm just pretending to be a vampire for a second."

"Here, lemme take a picture and see if you disappear," Chad Smith jokes.

"That's mirrors, babe," Traci says.

"Huh?"

"Vampires can't see themselves in a mirror."

"Oh. Is that's how vampires work? Is a picture like the same thing?"

"Let's find out," she says. "Even if you're right, I'll let you kiss me with that garlic breath."

They take a break in the food court. While Traci checks her texts, Chad Smith tears into a big soft pretzel pebbled with shattered windshield salt crystals and spots a boy slinking through the tables. He can see the kid throwing him looks of equal elation and terror before quickly glancing away. A fan—a big fan. There was no vacation from them, but pleasing kids was easy. Through the years his drumming ability never translated into plain celebrity. It was only ever recognized by the drummer cult: hopeful teens and bald guys with pony-tails. His most recent ex had suggested he "reach out, cultivate his brand." Until Traci, women never found him magnetic in this way, only within sexy proximity of his bandmates' metastasized male beauty. He sees a chance to blow another young mind and display for her some high-octane sensitivity.

"Wuh," the kid stammers, "are you Chad Smith, like from the Chili Peppers?"

"Sure am, my man," Chad Smith says, resisting the urge to glance at Traci's face from behind his sunglasses.

The kid turns to look at his dad sitting at a nearby table. His dad is smiling big and his hand is up high, first holding a thumbs-up and then index-pinky devil horns.

The kid faces Chad Smith and softly asks for a picture. "You got it," Chad Smith says, "but only if I can have a sip of your smoothie." Dicking around loosened the kids up, reminded them to breathe. Plus he was parched.

The kid automatically hands over his iced milk boba tea, sweet tapi-

oca bubbles packed in the bottom of the plastic cup. He gives his cell phone to Traci, who smiles with an aunt's adoration.

Chad Smith feels an enduring calm, and then the bladed flame of a badass's contentment. He imagines this photo blowing up the kid's news feed, maybe getting Scotch-taped on a closet door. Even the lowliest knight is in line for the throne. He pulls hard on the extra-wide straw, too hard, and a bunch of tapioca balls stick in his throat. His eyes well up behind his sunglasses.

The dad's fingers ripple with air guitar arpeggios.



After a protein shake and a push-up series John Frusciante goes to his blue room, opal orb lights and four nautical walls, and gingerly reflects, trying to grant deference to the lingering dream-state anxiety and gently cast it off. But the anxiety papercuts his resolve. It can't be whisked off, like dust in the light it just swirls in place. It manifests into a barely-inflated beach ball, to mentally punch it makes it lop and hover in the air, subject to the wind, then land like a taunt nearby with obnoxious softness.

"I am a weightless moth in pursuit of the sun," he tells the room. He has been taught to own weakness in order to accept mercy. He opens a special carved wooden box and from it pinches a measured dose of leaves, places them in his mouth. He tries to relax every muscle except his jaw. At the ready are his notebook, a pen, and, if he manages to find a yet unstoked temerity in the external realm, his electric Fender Telecaster armed with a warm and humming Marshall full stack amp.

John Frusciante allows himself a glance at his guitar rig before closing his eyes and slinking to the interior. He tries to rid his heart of desire. Not once during his journeys has he managed to pick up the guitar, his body hopelessly vacated. His attempts to jot thoughts in the midst all failed. "John Dawn, there is nothing to tabulate," Josie Ray told him. "Only felt matter to sift in your heart's aggregation."

John Frusciante invites calm. He focuses on inactive air and chews. The plant granules go soft and he swallows. There is a period of nothing that passes uncounted. John Frusciante's mental balance grows sturdy enough not to acknowledge.

Then as expected, he finally gets chuckly, first thinking about silly jingles and melodies, pop detritus, and then finding plain things hilarious in their incredulity. The blank face of an apple, a bored cat. It's a cousin of stoned be-

musement. He's taken back to sharing joints after class, entering a convenience store and feigning normality, the giggly volley of keeping cool while knowing his eye whites were ruined red. The zone is familiar nostalgically and per his research. He has learned not to judge his humor trip, to let the absurd alterations of realm transversal run their course. His intrinsic ether gets populated by YouTube pratfalls, the submix tuning into the bludgeoned synth chord stabs of the NBA basketball telecast theme. His brain pan serves a memory of seeing David Lee Roth straddle a urinal stall at the Grammys, his pants to the floor, shouting for everyone in the cramped bathroom to "Get a look at the real trophy".

John Frusciante still hadn't gotten a bead on the plant's molding of the past. The memory drive was maddeningly inconsistent. It dealt midlife minutiae to the fore just as forcefully as last week's spat with Josie Ray. It might be his reluctance to confront dark regressions, but he knew assuming his reservations held any reign over the plant's will was weakly arrogant.

He is eventually able to resolve a bout of Neil Young songs, to conclude and conceal them psychically, shelve them like CDs into his mind's collection. The mental clutter is dissipated. But it is not replaced by a transcendent void, a dearth of self. He still feels his body in a room. Somehow, he isn't disappointed. He trusts himself to open his eyes; the idea doesn't feel like a flow disruption. He returns to the room and is buoyed. He feels alert and charmed. His equilibrium is analgesic, a room-temperature optimism. It's a familiar feeling, one with a very old name. It's a leveled calm he started calling 'ordinary ecstasy,' coined after the contract renegotiation with Warner Bros. that afforded him a house in Brentwood and the contacts required to upgrade from oily cartel junk to pure and pricey Afghani heroin. After hours of caustic lethargy on his roof terrace, the smothering high would soothe into a stable plane, his blood smelting into steady transmission. He would feel unthirsty and effortlessly sociable. He would feel capable of driving unaccompanied to the grocery store, like the simplest interaction with the public world was harmlessly elevated, imbued with an innocent elation without the thread-pull of stupor, a totally relaxed integration. Under the spell of ordinary ecstasy, he felt like a citizen, a neighbor. He said hello to passersby from a lean on his lawn gate, asked them what their day was like, found the patience to pretend to enthuse about the Dodgers.

But this is not expected. The salvia has not yet granted him a tranquility turn like this. The onset of the ordinary ecstasy isn't a distance, or a disassociation. It's not the slightest bit extra-dimensional. It's too real. And something is clearly missing from the formula: the rinsed circulatory wring after a deep narcotic soak. An old nameless hunger approaches. His muscles are slowly

seized by thin tendrils of doubt. He is hit with an impulse to go outside and find a place to chat with pet owners which he immediately distrusts. His spine is mentholated, and just as the chill licks the back of his cranium he feels his compulsion nodes spark with the flint-cracked desire to tie off, to call the bassist and recover deleted contacts and procure a fucking vehicle and score a bag. His forehead perspires in a salt squeeze. But something in his sternum prevents him from leaving the lotus position. The room begins to cease. His nervous system recedes.



Anthony Kiedis kicks the paper from the porch and immediately regrets his tantrum but the guilt is submerged by the paper's satisfying trajectory, then completely drowned out when he confirms no one saw him as he gets into his car. He speeds to the Starbucks drive-thru and orders a drizzled frappe and an aproned associate named Chandler tells him he can't accept his too-large denomination. The afternoon sports talk radio host descends into beer-battered ideological furor after berating a caller for bringing up Coca-Cola's mass privatization of the Kenyan water supply. A headphoned pedestrian carrying laundry crosses the street too slowly in front of Anthony Kiedis's Range Rover then accidentally spills some garments and chooses to retrieve them in a perilous squatted back-reach. Anthony Kiedis is convinced the day is trying to trample him. Calista had just called to back out of dinner at Jitlada and the Laker game. One of her friends that he has only ever heard her complain about has a medical emergency. He heard himself overcompensate with condolences on the phone, sounding sorrier than she did, and didn't register her irritation until the call ended.

Anthony Kiedis resolves to go to the game but has to pick up the tickets from his dad in Burbank. The two-story he financed for his father is behind a dense commercial cluster of boutique coffee and vintage denim. Cars are aggressively huddled on a hard grade and he has to park four blocks deep. He hikes uphill and sees his dad holding court on the wrap-around porch, flanked by tall cigar ashtrays and prayer flags.

Parts of his dad remained the same: improvised wisdom, Wilt Chamberlain worship, a serial tail-chaser at 75. Other parts were getting scrapped due to wear: short-term empathy, conversational patience. He more often slid into his steely football coach condescension, offering slight praise only to follow with double reams of ass-chewing to ensure no one got comfy. He tried to remember

the man's newest desiccated blonde with permanent eye liner tattoos. Marilyn. Carolyn. Anthony Kiedis had gifted his Lakers season floor seats to his father and the old horndog kept tipping them to the mailman.

"Get up here, Tony," his dad shouts from his papazan chair, tapping a stubbed increment of cigar. Anthony Kiedis scales the stairs, puts a firm hand on the man's shoulder.

His dad hands him the envelope without standing. "You know what she said about you last night? She said, 'That boy of yours has a barrel chest, it's like an engine block.' It's been too long since she got underneath one. This is what she said: 'He looks like he picks up Dior models right off the plane from Moscow and fucks them for the cardio.'"

"Lyn is projecting," Anthony Kiedis smirks. "I fuck them for the edification. She's right about my chest, though. Should I let her feel around under the hood?"

"Don't get the wrong idea," his dad says. "She appreciates everything loudly. George came over as we were all headed for steaks at Ruth's Chris. Suddenly she's telling him about the lap dance she gave me the night before. This is what she said: 'I'll have to remember to close the drapes next time. And to do a set of squat thrusts.' Incredible. She's got a whole routine. She does the hot yoga, have you heard about this?"

Anthony Kiedis puts the tickets in his back pocket. The envelope is glazed with a photo of a cropped midair Kobe Bryant airborne in a yellow void. He doesn't know if he should get off the porch or ask for a cigar. "Are you coming to the game with me?"

"I thought you were taking what's her name," his dad says.

"Calista," Kiedis spurts, instantly cattle-prodded. "Her friend's baby was stillborn. Her friend's sister. She doesn't like basketball. And she's having a hard time right now."

"Just tell her you're sad too. They love that. 'I'm sad because you're sad.' They love that."

Kiedis feels plunged by his indifference, then guilty for unsheathing the miscarriage, then dumb for wielding it like a dowel taped with party streamers. "It's more substantial than that, Dad."

"It's always more substantial with them. Every trauma has the same level of gravity. You learn to mourn every lousy parking ticket."

Anthony Kiedis makes for the stairs, his feet brokering something his mind can't. "It's either you or Lyn sitting courtside tonight."

"I like the game on TV. The arena ruins my ears."

The Lakers are shooting 32% from the field by halftime and Anthony Kiedis is loath to admit the arena is assaulting his senses. Jack Nicholson leans over the empty seat between them and asks him to sign a CD for someone's kid and calls it a "CD-ROM". Anthony Kiedis tries to volley this joke but Jack Nicholson doesn't catch it or refuses to play along and says the kid he's signing for is "a fine student and a remorseless capitalist in training."

Anthony Kiedis beats the traffic and impulsively pulls into a 99 cent store on Sepulveda to get a Mexican-style Coke in a glass bottle but they don't have any and he gets rippled with depressive waves by the sight of these incorrigibly shitty Frisbees in a huge watermelon box palette by the entrance.

He gets home and heats a kettle for chamomile tea and puts on a lesser Charles Mingus album simply to avoid silence in his kitchen. He watches his two cats come in nearly rubbing their sides together, their tails perked and curled on top, and munch from the same bowl. One finishes and rubs the top of his head on the flank of the other. They each find a surface on different sides and elevations of the room and ignore each other. It reminds Anthony Kiedis of the business he's been neglecting. Rehearsals for the next album's material had gotten so toxic that the group called to break for a few weeks. He and Chad Smith were thumb wrestling at every turn, stooping to haughty and abstract arguments about ghost note theory. Even worse was their guitarist Josh Klinghoffer, once their young ace in the hole, now gerrymandering their songwriting process with encrypted riffs and monoxide solos. Anthony Kiedis has been fantasizing about getting John Frusciante back, but his old friend had been neglecting the short but warm check-in email thread they refreshed about every quarter.

He decides he has to call Chad Smith tonight, quickly dialing before he can compose himself. "Where are you, boss?"

Chad Smith is in South Beach, the surfing trip.

"I'll come right out with it—I'm sorry about when I said you were un-inspired," Anthony Kiedis says with honest remorse that still ends up sounding mustered, but discovers his tone irrelevant as Chad Smith states that he's barely thought about it since.

"What I meant was that your ideas aren't always of the same scope, but you still have an essential perspective," Kiedis says, knowing it's a paltry concession but feels for the first time that he needs to be courteously brief with Chad because he is on vacation.

Chad Smith says that's fine, he's going to drinks right now with Traci, and could they talk about this when they start back up next month? Kiedis al-

most asks who Traci is but remembers just before the sentence leaves his throat, causing a jilted pause. “Enjoy the waves,” he says, affecting too much joviality and realizing he’s speaking to Chad Smith like he did Calista, piling on apology for something seemingly unchangeable about himself, something they have already excused through annoyed resignation.

He makes a plate of Kalamata olives and brioche and looks at his DVDs. He puts on *The Net* starring Sandra Bullock and hazily recalls someone trying to cajole him into getting on social media last week. He is slowly convinced parts of the movie are very prescient. When the dashing British antagonist appears, he remembers it was Billy Corgan, who had cornered him at an awards show gifting suite. Billy Corgan was drunk with validation at getting thousands of likes every day on the official Smashing Pumpkins Facebook page. He refused to have an intern at the label automate the updates, insisted on checking every message and reading the comments. He was getting dosed on the metrics, seeing real-time reaction to every news item, consuming every last praise and sling. He was collecting them from above like prayers. Anthony Kiedis remembers being impressed with himself for silently convicting Billy Corgan of “bean-counting his fiefdom.” He carried that with him all night.

The internet is a place he doesn’t want to be in any era, Anthony Kiedis declares to his heart’s stenographer, before brushing his teeth and taking the new meds with a large gulp from a fresh can of San Pellegrino and throwing the rest away because he hates soda but likes how the carbonation punishes his throat. He goes to bed trying to think of something else he can waste thoughtlessly that will make him feel as good or better tomorrow.



John Frusciante feels a drip of awe plink onto his crown chakra, cascading into an emulsified body flush. The entrance is looming. He tries to compose himself, to focus on his practiced emanations of respect for the realm, but he cannot measure his breath. He feels his spatial memory templates seal off, all remembered rooms are expunged, most of all the one he occupies. His mind is caromed into the salvia space. His vision pixelates into an ionic perception: nothing is inert. He closes his eyes to stop them from vibrating and the darkness catalyzes his panic. He feels shame for surrendering. Opening them again is a seismic thrust, a slid solvent from the floor, his corporeal self a tiny amount of liquid twirled at the bottom of a glass, circular currents coring his middle, turning concave as his rises up the sides.

His vision subdivides from vibrated planes to geometric distortions, amoebic shapes sprouting fanged corners, then more corners, blade-like rotational symmetry spinning. He fixates out of fear and springs a vertigo stumble, his axes irrelevant. He wills his inner-ear codex away from a vomit precipice. The detail is disorienting, he realizes he has to scale back. He tries to open wider, to scope the full kinetic panorama. His nerve coils gift him with calm. His vision is cluttered but hinged, buoyed, secure. The colors shift into peerlessness, the corners round. The shapes turn into numerous flowers, superimposed over more determined flowers.

John Frusciante knows he is speaking because his jaw flexes with resolute emanations but his audio is gelatinous, subfrequent swells behind an inch of bathwater. He is spoken to, or simply experiences a phrase: “California total flowers,” culled from an inner voice, not his own, but of a trustful emissary entity. He is startled, but it manifests only into a tiny bloom rupture, an abrasion in the shapes that gets peacefully bubbled over. He appreciates math without thinking the word. His fear was over-articulated. It’s nothing; he punctures the beach ball with the affirming pin of a deep breath.

He senses a safety in closing his eyes and his interior is newly glossed. The flowers are embedded softly into his purview like an unobtrusive watermark. He feels a need to test his agency, though meekly, and this ushers in a personal gestalt association: a fountain soda cup lid, the edge splayed with sharp plastic softness, its face rotating like a satellite in the chromatic flower vacuum. It even has a little flower he can press to indicate the content of the cup is Dr. Pepper. The rest of the buttons are labeled with intimidating Coptic insignia. He has stopped judging his internal imagery. With psychic empowerment, will enacted, he pushes all of the drink lid buttons like he always has. A carbon impression on his tongue. Soda as a dream of juice, reverse water, he feels the realm indicate he has made the correct selection.



Flea and his mom are talking about movies. Flea uses the word “film” and his mom uses the word “movie”. She just re-watched a George Clooney movie she loves where he is an aging American assassin looking to pull one last hit job in Italy. “Do you consider yourself a patriot, Mom?” Flea asks. She laughs a little. She says she can barely stand politics. “I consider myself a patriot,” Flea says. His mom says her sister in Rochester got really into the Tea Party for a while, was talking constantly about how Obama was going to so-

cialize this and that, but her outrage petered out after she stopped going on Facebook every day. “If I think of myself as a patriot,” Flea says, “then anything I do is suddenly this embodiment of the American ideal. If I’m a patriot, then, you know, burning incense every morning and eating a vegan breakfast is suddenly an American institution.” His mom ashes her cigarette. Her sister had a really nasty breakup with this orthodontist she was seeing and stopped going on Facebook, she says, so she stopped seeing all the blogs and things his friends were posting. “Have you thought about what it means to be a real American, Mom?” She says the orthodontist had been divorced three times, please, who doesn’t see that mess coming down the pike.



The transversal is no longer alien. John Frusciante is not afraid of the sphere. He accepts a temporal lucidity, his bandwidth maximized, gaining access.

He recognizes the past inch closer and loom like a sought skyline from the interstate. Something familiar is encroaching. A desert expanse develops, a sky opens. The memory drive is active. A familiar brightness, an explicit sun. He sees through old eyes, embodies a former self. He is twelve years old in Tijuana, a summer glaring.

He is sitting by a resort swimming pool. There are distortions: light grain pulls at his eye corner aperture. He is drying on a light plastic white bench, looking at the twinkling pool. He does not merely see a stock shorthand of water; the dimensional properties of the pool, its refracted depths and micro-conduits are staggering. He looks down to see his hands as they were, not yet calloused from fret board abrasion. He cannot stop what is inevitable.

He rests his hand on a small cactus below the bench. Back then he had done it unknowingly. He hears himself curse loudly, nasal and clumsy, squawking a word he’d been looking for a chance to try on. “Shit,” he hears himself speak, so loudly, a sound finally coming from himself, and it repeats in the realm, so quickly it laps unto itself, the shit turns to sheets, then to shush.

John Frusciante’s mother on a white lounge, the simulacrum sun shining only for her, without looking away from her book, speaks to him and he hears it, in stark chrome definition: “John, it is unbecoming of a young man to use swear words.”

John Frusciante hears himself: “unbecoming.” Recognizing it as his state of being. He says it again and is transfixed by the pool water amalgam,

the shadows of itself refracting and generating white streaks, then fading into a solid cold blueness. His ceiling.

Josie Ray appears in his granular vision, kneeled beside on the carpet with water and a blanket, repeating his mantra, “unbecoming,” assisting with his reality arrival. John Frusciante is only half recalibrated, kicking the comforter violently flush into his physical being. Josie Ray repeats, “unbecoming”, warbling a little as she reaches from her knees to switch off the guitar amp, which kills dead a harrowing sheet of squalled feedback John Frusciante didn’t recognize until it was gone, like cruel refrigerator hum, and the silence jostles his body into the incorrect template, like an algorithym-rendered swimmer who has had the water matrix disappear with a keystroke.

RICK RUBIN'S MANSION

“RICK IS READY to put us up for as long as it takes,” Anthony Kiedis says, sipping ginger lemonade on John Frusciante’s roof terrace. “We need you to right the ship. We followed ourselves into a cave of our own making and just, whatever, we are adrift as hell.”

After a few stilted emails of awkward apologies and logistical wrangling, Anthony Kiedis came to John Frusciante’s house bearing raw juices and lilac arrangements, wanting to welcome him like an accomplished alumnus. The band had ultimately decided to cut Josh Klinghoffer, the virtuosic guitarist that replaced John Frusciante in 2009. The last few months of rehearsals saw the modest phenom turn into a breaker of spirits, suddenly building expensive gazebos on creative real estate the rest of the band had too-comfortably leased him in times of contentment. The Red Hot Chili Peppers were four years removed from their last album and didn’t have a single new song in the can. The banquet days were over and they knew they needed the classic formula.

“I want to make a record that detonates mind-worlds and I want to make it with the band,” John Frusciante says. “But know that the decision was never up to me. I go where I’m led. My guitar has made its intentions clear.”

The two of them couldn’t resist noticing how this was transpiring just like it had 1998, when John Frusciante was forgiven for the dope-sick troubles that incited his first ouster and prompted the Dave Navarro era, a collective trauma which would remain forever verboten from discussion. Back then John Frusciante had kicked junk for good, and with an oceansprayed vigor they recorded *Californication*, the album that kept them relevant into the new millennium and opened the door to the rock pantheon. John Frusciante was the architect, Anthony Kiedis reminded him, rounding off the funk corners and jazz tendencies into subdued FM rock radio ambrosia. They want him to reimagine the band once again.

“Nothing more LA than a sequel,” Anthony Kiedis says.



Rick Rubin's mansion is partially obscured from the Laurel Canyon roadway by a tiered thicket of trees and ornate brickworks, a basketball court sunk inside the tropical spray. Standing before the foyer as interns and assistants loaded in, John Frusciante examines the palazzo, a greying decommissioned tour bus slumped in the dirt off the driveway with weeds strung around the cracked tires.

At the first production meeting, Rick Rubin insists on setting one ground rule: no personally disparaging statements. He says the slow work of writing the record in the studio will most often be a shitshow of snuffed ideas and micro-aggressions, and that the group needs to stick together when confronting every kind of creative turbulence. And then he stops speaking. He will text for the remainder of the sessions.

"anything I have to say can be easily done this way," he texts.

All of the Red Hot Chili Peppers' phones go off at the same time receiving the text. Flea's incoming message ringtone is a snippet of "Kind of Blue". All of the others are basic ringers. John Frusciante likes hearing the hive of digital alerts all at once. "We should sample that," he laughs. The jumble erupts once more and he points a finger in the air, incredulous. It's a text from Rick Rubin: "Rule 2 no samples."



Everything is wired. The Red Hot Chili Peppers get loose and jam exuberantly in the main tracking room for three hours. They flex familiar muscles, crane over storied blues vistas, salute a forgiving sun.

Rick Rubin takes notes as the tape rolls, texting directives:

"demand less from the drums"

"boring truth impressive lie"

"completely Normal smoke"

"sunset power sob"

There is a huge American flag suspended across the ceiling of the studio. Rick Rubin thinks America is, like the most enduring music, unapologetically dangerous and flawed.

Anthony Kiedis steps out and sits in the control room with Rick Rubin. He came to the mansion with no lyrics in hand. He wants to conceive every-

thing in this space. He also wants to bury the last six months of writing nothing but overcooked heart garbage. His lyrics, straining against something less like writers' block and more like an unforeseen crisis of confidence, had emerged as unshareable dreams, charmlessly esoteric, populated with half-remembered classmates and waiters. His love came in a can. All of his female protagonists were wearing inscrutable Mardi Gras masks, striking liquor ad poses.

Anthony Kiedis listens to his band in the monitors and tries to keep his pen moving. Rick Rubin is going to prompt him back to form, subject him to spirit loosening.

“getting kicked out of a revisited past” he texted.

“the cuckold sent to save us all”

“California genius”



On the first night Rick Rubin went to his bedroom alone except for Bob Dylan's Chronicles. On the second night Rick Rubin was joined by two women. The third night he brought his cat. The fourth night a pint of ice cream.

Lying his bed, Rick Rubin knows the Red Hot Chili Peppers are in crisis. They need to make a commanding statement, something wholly disruptive to rock dogma, yet have never been so scattered at the onset.

The band is a catapult, he thinks, and the music is a very large rock. The rock is armed inside the catapult. The band has the rock within them. The band, but John Frusciante in particular, wants to launch the rock to once unachievable heights. And the launch of the rock, the throw of the arm, is being restrained by many terrific pressures. These, if harnessed properly, and if the band has a good release, will help the rock soar higher than anyone imagined. But it is just as likely that the catapult can succumb to the pressures, collapse completely, the rock flung nowhere.

Rick Rubin knows of the temptation for the producer to act as the arm of the catapult, comfortably holding the rock, coaching the band to release at the right moment. Yet his success has come from being yet another pressure, a greater weight upon the rock, which ultimately brings the trajectory to an even more astounding apex.

Before winking off he catalogs his mansion's many resident ghosts: Houdini's gardener, children of surgeons to the stars, early tech investor robber barons. He still hears echoes of their unending coke tales, the panicked sighs of party guests who were rolling so hard they couldn't pee.



John Frusciante tries to find a suitable guitar tone.

“the distortion is too undergrad” Rick Rubin texts.

“needs finer sediment” Rick Rubin texts.

“scoot up the horizon” Rick Rubin texts.

“invokes too many boll weevils” Rick Rubin texts.

“might as well slap a flame decal on it” Rick Rubin texts.

“now you’re just putting pineapple rings on a ham steak” Rick Rubin texts.

“okay vegan potluck but it’s at a Unitarian church” Rick Rubin texts.

“just stick some receipts under one of the legs” Rick Rubin texts.

“k got it” Rick Rubin texts.



After some misshapen false starts, the band finally gets nice footing on a careless, breezy vamp that sounds like a pair of ecologically-sound sneakers on a Saturday. The jam naturally curtails into a chorus that distinguishes itself through a microscopic syncopation shift, then a pause for a photo, but the song maintains the same body temperature throughout. They conclude with a gradient fadeout and the band shares nods of satisfaction except John Frusciante, who feels he has taken a too-obvious and inoffensive path with the chords; “That riff is corn syrup,” he says, meaning a subsidized treacle already permeating everything in the marketplace. “Let’s run it again, I’ll check the gauges.”

“I was into it,” Flea says. “We’re laying ground work. It’s all in service of the vocals anyway.”

Anthony Kiedis is seated with the notebook. He looks up to reveal a panicked glance, nods, keep scratching.

“corn syrup keeps everybody fed” Rick Rubin texts.



Chad Smith is struggling to place the right syncopation for this new song that is coming together, a real heater. He knows it would be unacceptable for the rhythm to be plain. The song demands that the beat perform heavy lifting with a light touch. He wants the song’s motion in spurts and drops. He

wants it to sit in the pocket but also fundamentally obliterate the pocket.

“the groove is going somewhere should it be lateral” Rick Rubin texts.

“I want the groove to be lateral,” Chad Smith says.

Flea doesn’t know exactly what he wants but he knows he wants the groove to be vertical.

They all agree they want non-invasive tambourine.



“Great player,” Anthony Kiedis says from the rear balcony during breakfast.

John Frusciante has asked about Josh Klinghoffer, the departed guitarist.

“He used to be very in touch with his motivations,” Flea says, serving himself more tofu scramble. “But then he got obnoxious, he was going beyond the scope.”

“He said we needed way more synths,” Anthony Kiedis said. “Which, we’ve had this discussion before.”

“You didn’t want to do synths?” John Frusciante says, sipping juice.

“I wasn’t so much opposed to the synths as I just thought it was garbage how he phrased it,” Flea says. “He made us feel like Luddites for not wanting to key and quantize everything. The guy was on a tear.”

“He started talking about guest vocalists,” Anthony Kiedis says, leaning back from the last of his steak. “Giving some people features on the tracks. I’ll be the first to say it’s not a bad idea, but it’s a pop move. Everyone’s doing it.”

“Plus he was talking about promotional gimmicks before we’d even gotten in the studio,” Flea says. “Geocaching and like, Twitter contests.”

“I just want to have faith in us as an entity,” Anthony Kiedis says. “Other people want to do elaborate cross-branding and that’s not for us. Am I right? Am I being too righteous?”

“The Beatles didn’t have to cross-brand,” Flea says. “They didn’t have feature spots. The repertoire is singular.”

“What about their Cirque de Soleil show? In Vegas?” John Frusciante says.

“See, that’s artistry. Have you seen those acrobats?” Flea says.

“That show is incredible,” Chad Smith says above his ketchup puddle. “That show completely whips ass.”

“We had to let him go because he was getting all boy genius about

something we created,” Anthony Kiedis says. “Something with integrity.”

“Hell of a player,” Flea says. “Now with hell of a résumé.”

John Frusciante looks toward the palm trees, pulp wisps in his mustache. “We are going to use whatever means necessary,” he says, “and we are going to fucking mangle every precedent.”

The palms sway.

“I’m phrasing this very carefully,” John Frusciante says.



John Frusciante programs a dense sequence for “Ghost Palazzo” on his notebook. He plugs into the monitors, hits the space bar: a disciplined synth battalion gets subdued in a subliminal bass habitat, everything expensively modulated, a sifted coat of cochlear high-hat dander.

“Can it be less busy?” Anthony Kiedis says.

“Feel like the snare should be less harsh, but punchier,” Chad Smith says.

“the kick drum should swallow an egg unharmed” Rick Rubin texts.

“What is this in service of?” Anthony Kiedis says.

John Frusciante steps back into his lab, a hardware bank he’s assembled by a far window overlooking the pool deck, a marble decorative horse, three slender palms in a crown formation. He disarms the battalion, dials back the bit-crush, makes the syncopation sweatier.

John Frusciante hits the space bar: Flea pogos, Chad Smith starts bouncing on his knees.

John Frusciante thinks it sounds like a rave at Walgreen’s.



“mark it up,” Rick Rubin texts. Anthony Kiedis loathingly writes his newest lyrics on a long dry erase board. The band studies them for what feels to Anthony Kiedis a patronizingly long time.

Devotion

Faith is deaf until you hear that sound

I remember lots of tongues

I used to dunk

until I got stuck under God

I devote my yurt to you

Humboldt County construction crew

No one's around to tell me to stop

Outta sight, I've got blood in my eyes

"This is good shit right here," Chad Smith says.

"But what is the blood?" Flea says. "Is it the narrator's blood? Is it the blood of God?"

"I think the blood is really cool and you should keep that part," Chad Smith says.

Anthony Kiedis walks outside to the rear balcony. There is a plastic ashtray perched on a cinder block. He kicks the ashtray flush with his toes; it skids and spills and makes a satisfying clatter. His anger is depleted. Still he lifts the cinder block and heaves it down into the pool. It hits the water and sounds a promising thrum, throws an unsatisfying splash.



Rick Rubin has some people over. The interns fetch remoulade and ice. Flea compliments lots of people on their work. Anthony Kiedis holds court in a guest room, initiates a pushup contest with a conventionally famous rapper and an internet-famous video game reviewer.

John Frusciante gets nerved out of the party thoroughfare. Big gatherings make him feel suspended in syrup; his brain is dial-toning. Josie Ray left early, noting an uninhabitable excess of Taurus. He decides to lay low with a coconut water in the study. Two young women are chatting beside a taxidermy polar bear.

"Why do I love refreshing? I know there's nothing new waiting for me," one says.

"We're still just animals. Our analytics found people love watching fire but hate clicking on it," the other says.

They discuss the ideological chasm between a like and a retweet. John Frusciante, fearing his silence is expanding his creep factor, decides to conduct a straw poll.

"You guys hear anything good lately?" he says.

"I heard the Greil Marcus of video game reviews did fifteen more reps

than your singer,” one says.

“John,” he says formally.

“Yes, I’m Noah.” John Frusciante feels intimidated by her blue lipstick and boxy long-sleeve shirt that says *Meaningful Content*.

“Noah?” John Frusciante repeats softly.

“Yeah, it’s a boy name, I’m doing fine.”

“I’m Jemma,” says the other, as if Jemma is the word used to turn away a passed joint.

“So what do you guys do?” John Frusciante says.

“I strategize,” Jemma says.

“I advise, but I also consult,” Noah says.

John Frusciante nods, sees he’s already run out of coconut water.

“My mom linked me to a thing saying you’re back in the Chili Peppers,” Jemma says. “My mom links me to a lot of conspiratorial shit, but that thing was real. She loves you guys, it’s weird.”

“Wow. Well, it’s dads that tend to go crazy for us, but we truly love moms,” John Frusciante says without grinning. The women chuckle without appearing relieved.

John Frusciante chuckles with them. “We’re hoping this new album turns a few heads. It’s going terribly.”

“That’s what I read, at least from the less favorable sources,” Noah says. “I read people are convinced you developed ESP with your guitar and re-joined the band to fulfill its will.”

“I never read anything written about me,” John Frusciante says. “I’m—we’re just aiming to do something better than just another rock album.”

“Teens have a strange relationship with rock,” Noah says scientifically, as if she were reading a freshly loaded headline on her phone. “It’s sort of like an older guy at the club, his baseball cap curved in just the wrong way.”

Jemma gives a mournful yeah. “It’s not hardcore enough,” she says.

“The stakes are so high,” Noah says. “There’s all these other songs out there about dying for love and escalator sex. I remember back when there were at least some songs about following your heart and dancing outdoors and being too high at work.”

“That was two years ago but it feels like forever,” Jemma says.

“I could do without people making songs that don’t even pretend to not be ads,” Noah says. “NPR did a thing on this guy who writes 50 songs a day. They’re about, like, cast-iron pan maintenance, about how he only likes the little eight-ounce cans of Fresca.”

“Yesterday one of the interns played me this song,” John Frusciante says, “it was really gorgeous but the guy sounded like he was scratching his cheek the whole time.”

“That song is about anally inserting ketamine,” Noah says.

“How did I miss that?” John Frusciante says.

“Are you asking me to Google it for you?” Noah says.

“Not sure if it’s possible to write a song that isn’t a sponsored ad for yourself,” Jemma says.



Guests slowly vacate and Chad Smith kills a Miller High Life by the pool, tells the rest of the Red Hot Chili Peppers that something needs to be done. “We have to cut loose, guys. Free ourselves up. Obviously we’re not gonna go wild like we did before, but we need a spark. We’ve always kept a little mayhem in the mix.”

Chad Smith looks around at his bandmates. John Frusciante is cleaner than soap. Anthony Kiedis only smokes low-THC indica and only alone.

Chad Smith slaps Flea on the shoulder and invites him to shotgun a beer. “I know you’re doing paleo or whatever but let’s tie it off like idiots for a second.”

Flea looks at him with what he thinks is a plain disinterest, a mild shaking off of an insubstantially bad suggestion, like ignoring a passenger’s misremembered directions. But Chad Smith thinks he’s bluffing for fun, opens his mouth comically wide. “Let’s bubble up!”

“Wow, it’s been a while since I’ve done that,” Flea improvises, betraying apprehension, but failing to say no in fear of robbing Chad Smith of relief after a difficult session. Rick Rubin had run him into the ground playing “Home Depot beats”.

Chad Smith cinches small cuts in the beer cans with a house key. Flea looks at the other Red Hot Chili Peppers. He punishes himself for momentarily thinking about tossing them an eyebrow raise, a quick flash of secret condescension against Chad Smith, and knows not to beam his annoyance. He does not want to put anyone out in this gathering of expressive minds, to be the one to initiate a fucked up coalition while the album is at a delicate standstill, to violate the one standing rule.

Chad Smith hands him a Modelo with a diamond mouth hole sliced in the bottom. They tap their cans together. Chad Smith immediately pops his tab

and opens his throat to let the hard cascade daub through the hole. Flea brings the can to his mouth and follows, hoping he can sip his way out and congratulate Chad Smith once it's over, but the unexpected rush of cold foam forces him to earnestly chug. He immediately runs out of oxygen and goes red in the neck. Chad Smith throws his empty can to the ground and does an intense exhale just as Flea lets half of his can pour onto the concrete.

Chad Smith laughs and so does Flea, weakly. "You lost your touch!" Chad Smith says.

"Didn't quite have it," Flea says, smiling but then not. They sit back down. Chad Smith hoots for a bit, pops another tab.

"You still got your touch," Flea says abstractly.



"It's simple: Punk is no rules," Flea says. "The absence of authority. A vacuum of responsibility."

"That's too simple," John Frusciante says. "Punk is opposed to social norms, but that makes it inherently principled, even if the execution is sloppy."

"play a riff about class struggle," Rick Rubin texts. John Frusciante looks at the floor.

"play an apolitical bass line" Rick Rubin texts. After 90 minutes, Flea gives up.



"Love is a passing train that you chase," Anthony Kiedis says stupidly on the backyard knoll. He is airing out the bad lyrics in hopes of inviting good ones. "lyrics don't grow on trees," Rick Rubin had texted.

Chad Smith kills an afternoon Bud in a dejected Morricone sun. "Have you ever resisted love?"

"Love is, so deaf and dumb," Anthony Kiedis says emphatically stupid.

Chad Smith tinks the can off of a decorative marble horse. "Have you ever backed away from something fierce and good because you see the end in sight and you thought it might hurt later on even worse?"

Anthony Kiedis looks at the horse. "Why resist love?"

Chad Smith stands. "Because, I dunno, self-preservation? Because if you give in right away, it could end up better than you imagined, in ways you didn't expect, and you'll end up consumed?"

Anthony Kiedis' phone chirps but he ignores it.

"I never could resist, myself," Chad Smith says, squatting down the knoll.



"Will the microphone pick up all my good intentions?" Anthony Kiedis says in the vocal booth.

"im going to edit out all good intentions and put in determination," Rick Rubin texts.

Anthony Kiedis sings like his fate requires patience. Then he sings like a bad decision recalled in pre-sleep twilight. Then he sings like an administrative holiday.

"this all sounds like an apology no one asked for," Rick Rubin texts.

Anthony Kiedis sings like teen angst against the surf. Then he sings like felicity refinanced. He sings like a wraith of fortune above the hyper-capital. He sings like a cumulus cloud convinced it has a huge cock.



The label reps are coming to review the initial batch of songs.

"Bring on the suits," Flea says.

"Just play them the songs," John Frusciante says. The band breaks by the pool.

The label loves it.

"I love it," one label rep says to Rick Rubin.

"We love it," the other label rep says. He is wearing orange and black running shoes under khakis.

"Now, it's got singles. Without a doubt."

"As you might assume, we always appreciate singles!"

"I can see 'Devotion' pulling movie synchs. It's built to haul a trailer."

"It's confrontational, but very 'windswept'. You like that? It's like a doily for your ears. Lots of spirit."

"Yes, but it's a classic spirit."

"Some great licks."

"Don't think I didn't notice the licks."

"The older crowd always digs the licks. They want assurance the musician has worked as hard as they have to get where they are."

“Well, that crowd is guaranteed to show up to this shindig. What I’m looking for is the potential with young people. And I’m hearing it.”

“The fact is, this sound, really elliptic and fine—young people are coming around to this sound.”

“They are coming around once again.”

“That’s right. It’s fair to say young people used to love this sound, but then they were assaulted by a lot of other sounds, some of them better than others.”

“I want to think young people are getting tired of either having their skulls fractured or their asses patted.”

“I want to think young people are tiring of all this barking and bellowing that’s flinging them to the ceiling.”

“Young people have it rough. They want those assuring licks.”

“We predict they are coming around to this sort of thing. Coming back around.”

“We expect they will love it to bits once it’s placed in front of them again.”



John Frusciante hits the space bar: Chrome canyon erosion. Bass and a browser reach a tectonic understanding. A bust of David Bowie, delay-crumbed and Baldessari-dotted. But then guitar: somber chords in parade daylight, pinched relief, chorus and reward.

“It’s beautiful,” Anthony Kiedis says.

“It hurts but I’m fine,” Chad Smith says.

“write what you know” Rick Rubin texts.



The dry erase marker is nearly dead, the streaks like redacted kindergarten calligraphy, but everyone can read Anthony Kiedis’ reworked final verse to “California Genius”:

Old punks squatting in the new punk scene

The Pacific retweets New Balance sneaker sheen

Resisted love, florescent club

e-Meter audit reads Didion Dunne

I did it I'm done

Makeup streak beneath a butane sun

Chad Smith yowls, slowly claps his meaty hands. No one stops his applause until the digital hive springs again.

“do more with less” Rick Rubin texts, to everybody.

Anthony Kiedis fits his entire phone in his mouth and screams. It sounds like a blood harmonica, an animal with a bandwidth rash. John Frusciante pulls out his micro-sampler, stares at Rick Rubin, hits the little red button.



“I’m loving this, Jesus,” one label guy says.

“Now this is something,” the other label guy says. He is wearing tight khaki shorts with a navy blazer.

“That other material was a cut above, let’s be clear.”

“I was astounded by it, personally. It was focused.”

“It made its purpose known at the onset.”

“But this. It’s so ambitious. But it never tries to outrun me.”

“See, this is kind of thing I’m thrilled just to be a part of. Sometimes the industry reminds you why you keep showing up.”

“This is a real triumph, guys.”

“Feeling like this must have been prophesized.”

“You’re gonna have to play that back for me again.”

“I just don’t remember hearing something that implicated me in its power so much.”

“It’s telling me something difficult I haven’t been able to tell myself.”

“I feel like I have to own who I am in its presence. I want to aspire toward its goodness, and yet it consoles me for failing.”

“It’s bludgeoning me. It’s peeling away all the protective layers of bullshit until there’s just a quivering heart there. That’s me. That’s all there is. I’m that fucking heart.”

“When I hear it I feel like I’m being forgiven. For being alive. And everything else.”



Flea, in need of mayhem, or to prove to himself his capability of mayhem, jumps from the balcony into the pool and strikes his hip on the bottom but not very hard. He feels gradually excused from fear as he exits the pool without much of an ache. He might be bruised but it's too dark to see. No one is around. He thinks about what could have happened. He shoots a snot rocket into his hand and puts it in his hair. He looks up at the uncondemning night sky and then around the backyard. He spots a garden hose yarned around a marble landscape horse. He gets an intern to drive him to Walgreen's.



The Red Hot Chili Peppers have a water balloon fight that starts in the concourse and moves to the living room, the kitchen. Flea has placed plastic Walgreen's bags loaded with filled balloons around the estate. Anthony Kiedis pegs John Frusciante in the chest, the head. Chad Smith throws five balloons at once: one shatters in the tangle of Flea's legs as he dashes behind the sectional, a few bobble unbroken into the foyer. Rick Rubin fumes on the balustrade. He texts without looking at the screen, shaking his head at the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

RETIRED HOT CHILI PEPPERS

THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH JIMMY FALLON
INTERVIEW SEGMENT
JUNE 5, 2025

“First off: I loved the Chili Peppers,” Jimmy Fallon says. The audience applauds. “One of the greatest bands of all time. But see now, you’ve been out of the limelight for a while.”

John Frusciante nods gamely.

Jimmy Fallon purses his lips and flattens his tie. “And I understand, you got some work done.”

Much of the audience laughs and whoops, a smaller portion groans.

John Frusciante can’t think of a funny retort but doesn’t have to as the audience laughs after a comedic interval of silence passes.



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM
PHILADELPHIA, PA
FEBRUARY 29, 2025

A student stands. A teacher’s assistant weaves through the auditorium aisle and hands her the wireless microphone.

Q: Which musical acts do you think today, um, are taking influence from your work, from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, most prominently and have been able to make a continuation of your sound? Like any bands today that you’re excited about that, are basically,

flying your flag.

Flea thinks about the great musical conversation, how his work is an amalgam of subsumed influences, his own personal expression and fortunate creative accidents. He thinks about how the next generation's popular youth music, while inspired by or in reaction to his work, may not resemble his own contribution at all. He imagines one of his finest bass licks reaching millions of ears and altering the physiological capability of a bass lick in the average listener, and later someone else making a stylistically indebted but wholly different bass lick to similar acclaim, then someone else down the line reciting a very short poem of processed throat-clotted coughs that is understood to be what a bass lick is, or what a bass lick had become after time, and then another person twenty years later knocking over a washing machine with a running jump-kick and being understood and met with the same reaction as a bass lick, "except with less enthusiasm," he imagines, "because it's not actually a bass lick."



WWW.BUZZFEED.COM/ARTICLE/RHCP-JOHN-FRUSCIANTE-GUITARKIN

JUNE 1, 2025

John Frusciante's final post, from a string of dozens, on the comment thread beneath a BuzzFeed article titled "Former Red Hot Chili Peppers Guitarist Is Now A Guitar, Will Debut on *Fallon*":

the Guitar has been destroyed in every configuration. the only way to get closer is to subsume the damage i thought Guitars could not be trusted cuz they will tell everything you've shared with them in private so you can't let them leave your sight. the Guitar is pretty harmless its a living room piano the whole family owns Guitars it is the last rugged interface at first it feels like your fingers are bleeding



BULGARI HOTEL
LONDON, ENGLAND
DECEMBER 15, 2024

The Red Hot Chili Peppers officially broke up a week before depart-

ing on a four-month world tour in support of California Genius. Label executives, urged by A&R reps who spoke of the album like an alien totem, a holy text, had approved a promotional campaign that framed the record as not only a stunning statement by a top-tier rock band that maintained relevance over several decades but as a zeitgeist reckoning, a re-launch of rock music itself. This was piled atop John Frusciante's supposed supernatural reemergence and the seductive mystery of the four-month recording session at Rick Rubin's mansion. Expectations were astronomical. The album, effectively conjuring old magiks in a hyper-present context, placing diodes on the band's Starbucks funk physique and zapping it with MIDI peril, an inviting tapestry of vulnerability and idealized futures, a very good record, however astonishing in places, could never live up to the narrative.

The label axed the tour as domestic and international sales figures were throttled by retail returns, sighing reviews and a trickle of television appearance requests. The entire operation, musicians to management, were forced to accept an undeniable twilight for the band, prompting significant contract renegotiations and scaled-back financial considerations which proved the operation would never continue at the same scale. Warner Bros. Records and Q Prime Management met with the band in a London hotel conference room to arrange a week-long residency on Conan and a stint on the state fair circuit, and John Frusciante told them precisely where and how far to shove it. He went back to Brentwood and initiated a media blackout, which led music outlets to declare a meltdown, a trampling on the mount, the death of rock, a cooling corpse. The rest of the band, spiritually exhausted, began work to contractually dismantle the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

John Frusciante never wanted California Genius to earn them immortality. It could have followed the same story of any great rock record: four otherwise unemployable losers in a room hammering at emotional abstractions and loud noises that eventually became igneous. It was supposed to put John Frusciante back where he belonged: holding a guitar connected to loudspeakers throttled with absurd voltage, articulating peace and wrath in a stupefying language, making people's spines quake, and it was the guitar that had failed him.



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM
PHILADELPHIA, PA
FEBRUARY 29, 2025

Flea had accepted an invitation to a speaking engagement at Temple in celebration of its new Rock Studies curriculum. Rock music had become, like jazz, primarily of interest to institutional and critical study as its influence in the cultural landscape at large declined. Temple's new performance curriculum now featured the heavy metal shredding of Slayer's Kerry King instructed beside the Spanish classical finesse of Andres Segovia, which he was convinced as proof of rock music's historical triumph, even as he recognized the guitar being relegated the same excitement as the clarinet by middle school orchestra students.

However, rock signifiers had become en vogue as a throwback ephemera tool for electronic dance music producers and hip-hop beat-makers. Flea was experiencing a massively bolstered profile from his de facto guest appearance on a song called "Classic Rock" (called "the summer's sunniest, most pleasantly disorienting single" by Maureen Kline at *Billboard*), which prominently sampled and stapled together the bass lines to "Give It Away", "Fight Like a Brave" and "Higher Ground", threading them in a way that was but rhythmically intuitive, "an onslaught of friendly shrapnel" (Yves Martin, *Pitchfork*). The diaspora of popular music, much of which was necessarily handcuffed to household product, video game and cinema releases, dictated that only about four songs a year were bona fide omnipresent national hits. "Classic Rock" checked all the required boxes: resolute and cheerful synth leads rolling over a densely arranged skyline of vintage textures, old hit callbacks and pitch-shifted dialogue bits from popular movies and TV shows. Yet the crags of Flea's bass lines were the spine, ushered to the fore after the second chorus for the track's meadow-like bridge ("like that first water sip after the eye wobbles kick in," Jennifer Owens, *Rolling Stone*) before the seismic top-line hook took a final lap.

It was a hit by Mid Major, rapper-producer and young adult author and financial instrument day trader and former college basketball forward who wore in the promotional video a yellow long-sleeve shirt that read in tri-color screen print ALL ROCK IS CLASSIC ROCK (every O an upside-down peace sign) which toyed with the three standing definitions of "rock" as the newly re-inflated guitar music genre, diamonds, and roughly-cut MDMA.

Q: This is weird but I just have to ask you which drugs do you like if you do any?

“Alright, I’ll talk about this because it’s relevant. I’ve done a bit of ecstasy and had a very good time,” Flea says, to whoops and cheers. “But I was doing that stuff back in the ‘90s, so think about that!” The room titters.

“I didn’t really get the appeal until I went dancing for the first time in Ibiza, which has the best clubs in the world. Halfway through the night I felt like I was in a movie. What I mean by that is, not that it felt hyper-real, but like, I was being erotically pushed from the first act into the second. The night had been set up so well, I was with some close friends, and now was the time for action. It reminded me of an ambient techno track, it’s by Basic Channel, called ‘e2e4 Basic Reshape’. That’s the most common opening move of a chess game: the white player pushing the E pawn up two squares. Like the players have sat down, exchanged a quick glance and a handshake, and now the game has begun.”

The air conditioning kicks on. A student noisily exits the aisle.

“That song wasn’t actually playing in the club. This whole moment just reminded me of it. But anyway, I went outside the club for a breather and waited for the night to shift. It was so cinematic. People walked by, I went unnoticed. No scheme emerged, the plot didn’t thicken. I know I could have sat there with that feeling for hours, expecting something and maybe getting nothing. I didn’t come down in the slightest seeing all this nothing going on. I could have lived between the acts. I don’t think I’ll make a weekend out of this feeling all the time, but I get it. This generation’s idea of ecstasy is anticipation, even if it doesn’t deliver.”

Flea accepts the silence as ponderous.



LOS ANGELES, CA

MARCH 25, 2025

Everything John Frusciante sees on the internet is an advertisement, a nude selfie and an unfortunate prayer. At first he found pink-eyed teen girls peace-signing before statues of Stalin, bacon-eater bro skulls vomiting entire bottles of tequila in parking garages, a man standing nude beside Taco Bell drive-thru signs across America. He reads six pages of a message board thread about free market capitalism between a gun-loving diaper fetishist and a gamer named Gabriel whose furry persona (‘fursona’) is also named Gabriel. Something fucking a gorgeously illustrated hummingbird. A Tumblr stream, curat-

ing a mélange of inarticulate sexual deviance and anatomical absurdity that is not so much obscene as it is a mind-bending collecting all truly conceivable variations of flesh and fluid, called *Butt Guts*.

Josie Ray had left unceremoniously. John Frusciante had been griping again during their morning poses, and she couldn't muster any more calm endurance.

"The rejection is real, I hear and feel you," she said. "I just don't understand why you can't just return to the simple path you were on before."

"I was duped into thinking I could make a great musical gesture. There's nothing to pursue."

"But you weren't misled!" she said. "The guitar didn't speak, you spoke through it. And you said everything you wanted to. And the world didn't listen, because it wasn't phrased to their liking. Did you otherwise find no peace?"

John Frusciante reached for his slippers. "For someone that refuses to drive during retrogrades, you're being very selective about cosmic influence."

Josie Ray broke her pose. "Who the fuck *are* you? You used to never be outcome-oriented. Now you're just some consumer-grade asshole."

Music, his savior, his whole guiding sensory framework, had become a grid: chess turned to checkers. The same capital-driven sounds were kinged, those making the most base appeals to sex and treacle were promoted to royalty. Underneath the industry bleachers lurked cynical art snipers, collector scum, soulless gearhead technicians, stimulus-addled critics purporting interesting opinions over focused discourse, eBay mouthbreathers, contrarian hipsters, lonely teenagers, doomed amateurs. His analog modular synths, their switches and patches and potentiometers gleaming with deceitful spectrums, were as exciting as plastic Battleship trays. He had scrounged a few scattered frequencies one afternoon which only reminded him of other people's notes, tired songs, songs that had half-lives of relevance, half-lives of profitability. He didn't pick up all the pieces when he was done playing. Shoving them from their stands, the consoles made the sounds of good craftsmanship in reverse. Assessing the electronic scrap heap in his studio, he is gouged with self-conscious despair. Perhaps everyone was right: his contribution to the conversation was laughably behind the curve. He gets on his computer and subscribes to 400 acts on Soundcloud in two hours. He fears he may have become a catalog artist, a faulty consumer, until he finds himself halfway through a dancehall remix of "Classic Rock", Flea's hungover-in-the-sun single, the synths like being groped on public transit, the sample licensing of which he would have spit on if he hadn't spitefully sold off all his back-catalog rights to the label, and he realizes that he

cannot stand music. Cannot stand its emotional abbreviation, shallow melodic shorthand, how it pervades minds through the one bodily entrance that can't be closed, how the duration of a good song no longer created its own space that blocked out the recollection of every other song, how one song always follows another.

He is able to delete all his MP3s in a few clicks. He does away with everyone else's music in an instant. His own music takes more time. He digs into the glut of raw digital files from his recording sessions, loose demos and sketches filed in scattered folders. Then uninstalls the software, all the add-ons and applications and proprietary plug-ins, the updates and patches. Lyric documents, notebook scans. When it was all gone his desktop was bleached. He immediately starts downloading high definition feature films and very short porn clips. His patience for the former and impatience for the latter makes the download times feel the same.

He has scarcely lived a day without some hours spent with six strings, but his guitars mounted on the wall look like a crew of unwashed assholes congregated outside an irredeemable dive bar. Their grime is preposterous, the sunbursts and sheens humiliating. The Red Hot Chili Peppers was his life's achievement. It's the proudest thing of which he's ever been a part. Even his solo records, efforts where he exercised full creative control and at the time felt like complete artistic realizations after years of boring structure debates and futzy compromise, don't feel anywhere near as satisfying as the alchemy between him and those three dipshits he ran around the world with for decades. He wants to watch it burn. He reads all the thinkpieces. Certain lines get seared into his being. He tries to pass them in meditation, to place them like newsprint sailboats on the energy current of the karmic river but sees punctures on his blue room walls when he reemerges.

The Internet offers solace, a new meditative routine. When away from his computer he fears a loss, and even upon returning to find nothing he welcomes the return, the haze of checking, still checking; even if no new content or Google alerts or emails arrive he is at peace in the waiting, the suspension of doubt, anything could come but usually nothing, but he is checking and scrolling and anything that could come next would be manageable.



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM
PHILADELPHIA, PA
FEBRUARY 29, 2025

Flea was prepared to deflect any questions about the break-up of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. He loved his bandmates, yet the turmoil that resulted had irrevocably altered his perception of John Frusciante, who had aimed for impossible heights, did nothing to assuage the ridiculous hype and set the whole band up for a massive nosedive. He berated everyone else when he was actually furious with himself. Now he'd gone off to be cloistered and silent in Brentwood, where he should have stayed to begin with. The others were already slinking comfortably into career pivots. Anthony Kiedis accepted modeling offers, Chad Smith hosted drum clinics. But Flea felt like he was the one who had been gifted a rare artistic dénouement. After making work that was immensely popular and financially viable, but also progressive and challenging and respectable, the mega pop world at large still cited his value. And now the academy sought his wisdom from the dais.

He hears himself say, "I'd love to see someone make music and not post it online. That's how we used to do it."

There was an undeniable ego validation: the success of "Classic Rock" arriving in the immediate wake of his band breaking up felt too much like winning over everyone at a party with jokes just as an ex messily stumbles alone into a cab, so much that Flea had no choice but to enjoy it. Addressing a standing-room-only horde of fired up students and faculty, he makes a point of swearing for laughs.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring musicians?

"Hone your craft, don't ever listen to naysayers. Listen to Black fucking Flag. Or for some you, Claude fucking Debussy."



LOS ANGELES, CA
MARCH 30, 2025

Life after music. John Frusciante's email inbox is full of unwanted chatter: production inquiries, guest spot requests, interviews with foreign cor-

respondents. Friends write asking after him, invite him to villas and retreats. “I need to get you out of LA,” they write. He wordlessly redirects everything to his manager. He orders groceries online. His hermitude could be mistaken for an extended lost weekend. Coconut water, almond crisps, waxy cheeses. The frozen pizzas are organic, basil-scattered.

The stream puts him at peace, long hours spent linking and loading bits of unvarnished humanity, but John Frusciante can’t displace his rage for long. He catches himself Googling around for feature stories, back-handed tribute essays, smarmy reassessments of California Genius that try to glom it with cultish camp. On days when the stream is thin, he stoops to stomping around in the comment sections, baiting reactions from people. Sometimes he smugly impresses himself with deftness, but mostly he resembles a middle-schooler windmilling his arms on the playground.

I've been a lifelong Chili Peppers fan I even love J Frusciante's crazy solo albums and even I think the new album is shit. why is everything techno?? wHere the fuck are the guitar solos??????

John Frusciante: “I imagine you’re a lifelong fan of breathing: if your high fructose ass took the effort to climb a mountain for fresh air you’d appreciate it at the summit.”

I think the chili peppers are the best band in the world and no one's going to change my mind about that that said the album does get pretentious like the writer says but they could have blown everyone away if they kept john frusciante's great guitar paying this is just my opinion

“GOD do you put on a bib before you give someone head? How long do you look inside your tissues after blowing a wad in them? You probably jack off in traffic on the way to ask for poutine at Burger King.”

Eventually he went thread hopping, following links and users, finds his way to boards and forums. Burrowing into the air ducts of the internet, squirting vitriol into the void. Eventually he starts mocking people on obscure subforums, purging himself anonymously in the foulest-smelling corners of the web. He finds himself toe-to-toe with sewage trolls, neglected teen hackers, Men’s Rights creeps that post ex-girlfriend nudes between spittle-drenched discourses on Objectivism, terror gamers and furious virgins. Their rage was intoxicating, pronged with fuck-all insider slang, and when they weren’t posting

demented filth they had a lock on the content that silenced his internal monologue: videos of elaborate Russian car crashes, foreign TV carnage, GIF art of Michael Jordan dunking on the crumbling Twin Towers. Any shame he had felt spending hours online slugging on internet dopes was obliterated. He had childishly put a firecracker in an ant hill and ended up uncovering a catacomb bunker.

It was 4am when John Frusciante ended a tirade with “if you’re gonna cum during the Pledge of Allegiance you can’t let it hit the ground” and a user named Behraven sent him a private message.

Good shit Love the enthusiasm. I was just fucking off in the RHCP thread I agree california Genius was brilliant. rhcp took a risk, they took all of rock on their shoulders and tried to carry it into the future. Some of the songs are incredible, no one has the patience anymore, everyone wants either instant classic or something to rail on

Who was this asshole? John Frusciane pulled up the account profile. A prolific poster on the Red Hot Chili Peppers subforums, as well as Epic Metal and Otherkin Lifestyle.

He sends Behraven a response: “agree on all fronts about Cali Genius RHCP took a chance and lost their stack, you seem like a person with a goddamn brain what is otherkin”

Behraven invites him to a clandestine chat room. John Frusciante gets a kick out of seeing a URL obscured by useless characters, a suffix from a foreign country. Access is password protected, Behraven tells him its “kisses-mewindy”.

Behraven: did you not even bother googling otherkin idiot

John Frusciante embraces the bald cut-down, so much better than the passive aggression of mid-jam stink eye or piss takes backstage. He pulls the convo toward background info. Behraven says he’s a dude and he lives in Ohio. He has worked at a chain casual dining restaurant for seven years. He discloses a lot without much prompting, something John Frusciante feels he’s always prompted in people.

Behraven: my life online flourishes while things IRL stay perfectly still

Behraven: ppl at my job swap out ~8 months or so, incl. mgmt, no one knows ive been there for this long. im never at risk of getting a promotion i don’t

even want.

Behraven: every time someone gets the buffalo wings I say 'we import the buffalos all the way from nebraska' and most people laugh except the ones that have already looked away at one of the TVs and wont blink until theres a plate of potato skins placed under their four chins

A stoned sun peeks over Beverly Hills and John Frusciante wants to know what occupies this guy online. Why he's so prolific on the boards. And what the hell is an otherkin.

Behraven: i don't consider myself a human. in ideal form i am a dragon. i take kinship with the dragon, my true self. online I can manifest, explore the identity.

Behraven: you can tlak shit i don't care

John Frusciante feels his vulnerability. He tells him he's heard of much worse, people who make careers out of even more advanced delusion. Not that it's even a delusion after a while. "you are what you sell yourself to be," he types.

Behraven said he realized he was a dragon after feeling it in a dream. His skin was scaled flush in broad places, he had hyperextended bones from his arms, cheeks, tail. His tail was not long. He couldn't fly, it felt inconceivable so he didn't attempt it. His fingers and toes were bulbous, webbed and sweaty. His jaw was tubular, three sets of teeth in slim rows.

Behraven: I felt the fire inside me. A pilot light in my bronchial chasm. When have you ever felt yourself breathe in a dream? I knew I was breathing because it burned. My insides didn't char once I knew they couldn't.

Behraven plays guitar. He appreciates the subtlety of the solos on the mid-period Red Hot Chili Peppers records, the empty space, the expressiveness. John Frusciante feels a bit like a flirty Mary Sue. "If I told you I was John Frusciante you wouldn't believe me" he types.

Behraven: when i tell you im a dragonkin i know i believe myself

Behraven: i can only believe what people purport about themselves

Behraven: anyway gotta peace out

Behraven: i sleep til 3 before the dinner rush. u shld cool it w some of

these lords, they will remotely turn off yr CPU cooling fan if u rub them wrong

Behraven: payse

The sun casts morning onto the estates, still stoned, the light a resigned reluctance, and John Frusciante makes a protein shake. He maintains his breakfast routine even after 48 sleepless hours. He does thirty pushups and his eyes, hydrated with blood and woolen from pixels, don't immediately recognize the presence of new emails in his inbox. Entire conversations appear unfamiliar, a redecorated room. John Frusciante logs on to his email to find he's been hacked. Entire new conversation threads have appeared. Numerous contacts had written him in the night, politely notifying him they received some odd spam from his address, "some of it rather horrific," his manager writes, and the new colonizers of his account had piled on with abusive typo-scarred replies, explosively racist image macros, scat .GIFs, abrasions in digital camera light above bloody carpets. He looks at his own name sealed atop each one. He repeats it to himself a few times until it's rendered unfamiliar.

John Frusciante, the jellied key dangling in his mind's ignition, can only think to refresh. And he has a new message. Josie Ray, in lavender text:

I know I said I didn't want your energy anywhere near me again, but know this. I am still convinced that no part of you is ruined. You need to continue seeking. That thing which you've always sought.

It doesn't appear she's been depravity-bombed, not yet. His inbox is a prairie, the coast is clear. He has to change his password, decides it will be a streak of eighteen lower case q's. He thrums a bolt of them into the reset menu, losing count, thinking fuck it, he'll guess it later. Save settings. The prairie is silent.

He returns to the inbox, where he finds the creeps have been signed in the whole time. They've already sent Josie Ray a decapitation video, a slow one.

John Frusciante nukes his account. He goes to the studio where the guitars are fawning over themselves. He chucks one through the bay windows facing the back patio. A guitar flung to the mantle. A guitar suplexed to the Saltillo tile. The floor resists in a stupid way, his palms are slid raw like a loose glove. He smashes again and gets a reliving crack, the tile bits dusting up and the guitar neck splintered. The wood heap sits next to the broken synth motherboards. Despite his occupation, he's never actually smashed a guitar before.



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM
PHILADELPHIA, PA
FEBRUARY 29, 2025

Q: Hi. I'm actually a grad student here, one of the first people pursuing a Masters in the new Rock Studies program, so I'm very excited! Alright. Now, obviously "Classic Rock" is a huge hit. I actually heard it last weekend at the club, it was great. Everybody was peaked when it came on, it was awesome.

"Thank you," Flea says, "that tends to happen."

Q: I wanted to know how you felt about the sampling, in terms of the intentions of your old work being reworked by Mid Major for his own intentions?

"I have to say, using electric bass was a bold move that worked out. Electronic sounds can be menacing in a very different way from acoustic ones. Even the most atonal acoustic sounds aren't as scary as some of these wobble basses. I think it has to do with how artificial it is. Your brain knows it's been processed for maximum impact. In fact, I hated a lot of dubstep, drum and bass, that kind of thing for so long because it was like something mindless is out to get you. Our song is exciting, it has tension, but it also I think you have to take the best qualities of electronic timbres and give it the more natural, visceral feeling of acoustic ones."

Q: It seemed like California Genius was trying to do that. Acoustic and electronic. Trying to find that balance.

"I—you know, we let John take the reins on that record. He's really immersed in that world. We let him design that record on his computer and we'd never done that before. It was exciting at the time because John's brilliant. That record meant a lot to him, obviously. We haven't spoken about it much since the band moved on. There's still a lot to do with the band and how to divvy it all up and everything. Like figuring out contract stuff. It's not a nice part of my life right now. This is the hardest thing we've ever done. Walking away. And nobody knows what John is up to right now, in case you were wondering. It's

not something I can really delve into publicly.”

Q: No, actually. I wanted to know—just one more thing, sorry—what you thought about a lot of the press surrounding ‘Classic Rock’, and how—

“You know, I really don’t look into it that much,” Flea says, “but the fact that people are rallying behind the song is very flattering.”

The grad student gawked, blinked.

Q: Sorry. It’s just, most of the places I’ve read, they felt your samples added this kitsch component that made it so irrestable. They were saying Mid Major had kind of taken these bass lines and like, brought them to the table, but had to put them in a booster seat. These are just the places I’ve read.

Flea paused. He knew he couldn’t ask what these places were.

“Well what can you do,” he says. “Bloggers will be bloggers!”

No chuckles.

“You know,” Flea says, “today’s music loves to hang out in that sticky space between sincerity and irony. I think you should celebrate both.”

He quickly points to a kid in the front.

Q: Are there any new music industry models you’re excited about? My start-up is exploring some avenues. I’d like to know if there’s anything you’ve seen on the market that’s psyching you up. We wanna be the Fugazi of content. I think you feel me on this.



LOS ANGELES, CA

APRIL 6, 2025

After some undelineated time, through mammoth sleepless streaks and fury jags, the instrument pile slowly laced with cables and digital interfaces and hardware docks, clothes in his bathtubs and cardboard boxes in his sinks, John Frusciante gets back online. Music publications and clickbait farms alike speculate on a possible mental breakdown. Anonymous friends and off-the-record business acquaintances report obscene emails, violent and threatening missives. John Frusciante doesn’t read the comments.

He returns to the chat room. Behraven is logged in like he’d never left.

Behraven: where you been

John Frusciante tries to type but has forgotten the keyboard arrangement.

Behraven: i think i know where you been

He sends John Frusciante a file transfer link. It's a series of MP3s, in a zip folder called Exhavltd Flame Exhalation Mvsic.

Behraven: no one gets to choose their form, their voice

Behraven: embody that which you love most

John Frusciante pulls some cheap computer speakers from the pile, cues the tracks. Behraven has recorded an epic metalcore concept album exploring his dragonkin identity. Right away he shrieks indecipherably, a horned and pubescent warble, over a distorted castle keep fortified with lots of speedy barbed wire guitar sweeps. The lyrics, possibly outlining an entire fiber-optic network of grief or just different variations on melismatic jaw duress, aren't required to comprehend the white menace of his rasp. The programmed drums are flayed and tympanic, drum fill lopped with the character of boiled potatoes, ratchet clink hi-hats. The 16-minute finale ends with reverse-tide guitars, a horde of triumphant bit-crushed synth chords that are digitally chintzy but wholly undaunted. It's a shoebox menagerie of misery and isolation, Macbeth performed with a tabletop board game. John Frusciante listens to it in full while staring through the broken window, toward the night, at his cold lawn.

John Frusciante stands over the lightly dusted pile of instrument fragments. He kicks over some consoles, picks up the disembodied neck of his '68 Telecaster. Music saved his life more than once. He would like to give it back as a gift.

Behraven: who do you look up to most in this world?

John Frusciante, after some effort, types "hendrix".



PHILADELPHIA, PA
FEBRUARY 29, 2025

The talk ends. Flea bolts from backstage to avoid a thronged procession of nerds and brown-nosers and ditches his department handler, lies about being back in time for the faculty luncheon. He feels like he just received a painful round of reflexology, the afternoon of exposure and elaboration is fucking with his mana. For the first time in years he really wants a burger and doesn't bother mentally deflecting images of fatty runoff pooling in a wrapper. He drank three bottles of water onstage but his throat is pocked, sluiced of its strength; he doesn't want to talk about music anymore.

The commercial drag along the campus offers logoed school apparel, happy hour tacos, eCigarettes. Flea's leather trench coat keeps out a chilly breeze and conceals his tattoos, a tiny-brimmed bicycle hat hides his dyed hair. He's on the outs. He wants to find a record store to get lost in, forget the pedantic nightmare afternoon.

His phone points him toward a shop called Downtown Records. Flea likes how innocuous it sounds. Only he hopes the owner, probably an aging jazzbo or punk lifer, doesn't push him into reciting a breathless soliloquy about his chosen purchases, or want a stupid picture for the wall of fame behind the counter. For these reasons he's ordered online for the last few years.

A few blocks down, past a sports bar cluster and a corporate burrito chain, through an alley and down some stairs, the shop sits in a bland suite that could have been previously occupied by an insurance office. The front windows are so thoroughly papered with show posters as to negate the sun. As he pushes open the door, the strains of a '50s girl-group harmony unfolds overhead. The shop is untidy and without any other customers, the clerk arranging boxes with their sweated back to the door, so Flea steps in, thankfully unacknowledged.

Besides some yellowing promotional ephemera, on the walls are classic albums and rare collectibles with muscular prices, lined up on thin racks just above reach and spotlit with small art gallery lamps. Despite being rendered slightly out of touch this morning, he was certain barely-charming dumps like these were extinct. Perhaps the collectors market wouldn't keel over. Or the world was still producing enough hapless obsessives willing to leave their bedrooms to buy obsolete artifacts.

It's then he sees a peculiarity. There doesn't appear to be an alphabetized system. No sections by genre. He doesn't see any album art on the racks. All of the shelves are stuffed full of grab bags: secret selections of albums wrapped

up and sold for varying flat rates.

The clerk says hey. Flea doesn't risk a glance, waves without looking.

Most of the packages are sealed in brown paper with packing tape, Sharpie'd with highly precise genre designations: 1995-98 Minimal Berlin House >128 BPM, Southwest Female Glitch Country, Summer 2019 Ableton Jazz, Three Six Mafia (+ affiliated) Memphis Rap Tapes - Instrumentals. A few luxury grab bags, ones arranged by labels and PR boutiques, sealed in logoed prisma-lux glow foil and fray-clamped on the sides like soup crackers, are displayed in the same gallery lighting as the deluxe albums.

"Can I help you?" The clerk, blank fifties, stands at the end of the aisle in a sport coat over a t-shirt, boots beneath green chinos.

Flea is not prepared to get schooled again. "I'm good."

"You wanna hear something?" the clerk says, making toward his computer, his packing tape dispenser.

"Some jazz piano," Flea calls. "Art Tatum."

"Sure," the clerk says, typing and firing, the speakers instantly shuffling to lilted, rolling piano figures. Flea starts nodding along while reading some more oblique bag labels: *Denim Jackets through the Ages*, *Unrequited Nostalgia*, *Recession-Proof Ballads*.

"We got some of that," the clerk shouts. "Somewhere in there."



LATE NIGHT WITH JIMMY FALLON
INTERVIEW SEGMENT

JUNE 5, 2025

"Now, what does it feel like when you play with yourself?"

Abundant laughter. John Frusciante smiles.

Jimmy Fallon puts both hands up. "I'm very serious. Please! Really. What does it feel like?"

The room titters.

The agreement struck by his manager stipulated John Frusciante appear shirtless for the couch segment. Embedded in his torso were pickups, hooks for the strings. Certain parts had healed grey around the implant, skin cracked and red at the edges. The guitar neck was fused just above his hip, angled at perfect ergonomic height for fingering the fret board. The outbound jack, where he plugged himself in, was situated in the resulting scar tissue.

Green room staff told police John Frusciante smelled strongly of butane before taking the stage but had also “reeked” of body odor when first arriving to the studio. The stage manager had assumed “the hair and make-up people threw their hands in the air” and doused him with cologne before the interview segment. The Fallon production team felt no need for discretion in submitting the high-definition three-camera footage of John Frusciante’s immolation to investigators as images and video captured by audience cell phones were uploaded and widely dispersed as soon as his body was extinguished by overhead emergency sprinklers, so the official footage was also uploaded to the NBC website and viewed 36 million times before the servers crashed within an hour.

John Frusciante played himself without accompaniment and no vocals. He had composed the piece on a standalone guitar before the installation was performed. A specialist in Malibu, who primarily dealt with pacemakers, agreed to the surgery, not appalled at the proposition or the under the table financing, but needed assurance that John Frusciante and management would sign away any of his possible culpability. He was instructed to keep all necessary wires internal, embedded in the skin to maintain the integrity, and the grounded electrical current passing from John Frusciante’s stomach pick-ups to the outboard jack created certain involuntary abdominal muscle tensions, which in turn created whirring tremolo effects and spasmic tonal inflections. Each orifice was a potential source of unpredictable resonance. About to play himself for the first time, live on air, he kept his jaw tight, his anus constricted, his eyes open, for purity of signal.

“It’s in my nervous system,” John Frusciante says. “My bones—I feel it. Everywhere. Even before I had a way to express it. It’s always been inside of me, and now it can be released completely.”

Jimmy Fallon nods with a hand to his chin. Leans forward: “What does it sound like?”

John Frusciante glances into the lights. “It’s always been hard to find the words for that.”



PHILADELPHIA, PA
FEBRUARY 29, 2025

Flea thumbs the lunch bag paper, at a loss why anyone would go to a

shop just to roll the dice instead of getting exactly what they're looking for. He is always ready to be shocked, always ready to be untethered by art's endless novelty, but something like this is just bad business. He takes another look at the fancy packages, stickered and snug, and spies a full retrospective Art Tatum box set on the top shelf in the gallery light. It's being offered for a price that is staunch but easily within Flea's range. From its perch on the wall, however, it is beyond his wingspan.

Flea approaches the counter, thinking the clerk has a stool. Tatum's glistening chord figures are being ruined by the shriek of the clerk's packing tape applied off a roll gun. Flea tries to carefully time his call for attention when a guy nudges his arm.

"Excuse me," the guy says, a peppered beard and a newsboy cap and a look of expectancy.

Flea's underarms dampen. He normally never has a problem telling people off, but he's cornered. The guy looks an under-sunned 35, probably wants an autograph.

"Lemme past ya," the guy says, inching his paunch around and toward the counter, where he loudly puts down three grab bags.

"Anything good?" the clerk says, a sarcastic familiarity.

"You know I hide all your good shit in the bins down low," the guy says warmly.

The clerk takes his Visa. "I wondered where you got off to," he says. They chat about the Steelers, and once the receipt is produced the guy immediately starts tearing at the wrapping. Flea watches him rapidly flip through his pull, savoring only a few titles, stacking most of it and wantonly shoving the apparent crap discs into a garbage bin with all the wrapping paper.

Flea stares at the can. "What are you looking for?" he says.

"Charlie Parker mostly," the guy says, moving the keeper stack under his arm. "Any Parker."

He leaves. Flea stays put. While the clerk rips more tape, Flea pulls the shredded bags from the can:

Formative Tenor Saxophone

Pre-9/11 Genre Figureheads

Emblematic Virgos

Flea pecks around the shop for an hour, returns to the counter with a grab bag called *Living Room Piano*.

He walks outside and sits at a bus stop. He takes an apple out of his

briefcase, sinks it into his front teeth and lets it rest there in his jaw grip.

He tears the wrap, assesses the take: one rare, three uncommon, five common, one holographic.



THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH JIMMY FALLON
PERFORMANCE SEGMENT

JUNE 5, 2025

The solo began with a modest call to arms, familiar rock chord shapes in familiar configurations, their worn gravitas conjuring spinning wheels, abandoned shovels and swivel chairs, transcendent basements, potatoes peeled in a for-profit prison, the lawns that play host to halftime spectacles, and other towering shorthand for unassailable American decrepitude. He and his rig set the tone with boilerplate Ford F-150 wailing. But then John Frusciante closed his eyes, relaxed his loins, and the chords went prismatic, gained extraterrestrial volume, his entire body speaking, suggesting exoneration before doom.

As the action tumbled faster, he became uneasy with the trajectory. His mind was peering down the chasm instead of preparing to leap, and he felt his fingers drifting into a barrage of notes bereft of emotional disclosure, proficiency fool's gold, a public wank. It was no time to mindlessly shred. His chakras relocated their bisector, his patience recaptured, and the chords, once at their most precipitous and wronged, then became rippled and cooled, self-consoling, a swimming pool slowly calming after a surface disturbance. John Frusciante harnessed the stillness, bided time with a magisterial silence, and then articulated a tiny, atomic motif. He repeated the figure, the phrase throwing a fit, making mistakes, self-correcting in the inevitability of pain, before making peace with light and strobing open in ribbons, a mandala of coils, repeating its purpose. In John Frusciante's mind, the sound was exempted from Galilean strictures. The curvature of spacetime was dulled, the basic constitution of water altered, Jesus was drinking Satan under the table, the sound was faintly registered in the universal mainframe.

The strings, their unforgiving resonance, had upset his pH balance, his hormonal schematics, the excess voltage going straight to his liver. Heart throttled, he let his mouth hang open and the rhythm was derailed, the distortion in a fractured trajectory. But the static was advanced, each grain heaping, like holy sand, with exacting celestial arrangement. John Frusciante sequenced

it with intention, with his unrelenting hands, and his long wet hair started falling from the root.

Possessed within the flurry, John Frusciante finally recognized himself, a synchronized transmitter, the medium and the message. What did it sound like? Rock by way of conductive blood and abstract tissue, igniting new aspirations, mostly looking cooler than ever. Like anything else it wasn't entirely new, but in this form it would only ever be his. At long last, his very own blues. For one second, he felt, his life's embattled scree was without debt.

In the next second, while one hand finger-tapped the frets with whatever remaining sinews, the other produced a chrome lighter from his jean shorts, clicked a spark and flung it at his chest.

Upon the next second, in the first instant of the blaze, the studio audience was agape at the flame. Within that fragment much of the crowd, so taken by the solo's momentum they were yet to compute that the artist was burning, registered the green and orange inferno as astounding stage pyrotechnics and felt enthralled by the yaw of its sudden foreign heat. Those seated in the rear, however, where the studio monitor screens posted around the theater offered a better vantage than squinting toward the stage, were immediately disturbed by the transmitted blaze, the white balance of the TV cameras yet to adjust to the fire, the monitors displaying corrupted red bursts, a sunset bracing for high impact.

At first, John Frusciante maintained a firm spread stance, legs apart, arms high and wide, like a star.

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