



## Recording Red Hot Chili Peppers

The Californication album signalled the welcome return of the Red Hot Chili Peppers to the world stage. Paul Tingen discusses the recording with the album's engineer, Jim Scott.

The 'Californication' of the world is in full swing. Of course, it's been going on for decades, mainly via the influence of the likes of Hollywood and Disneyland. But recently there's been a major accessory to the global takeover, in the form of the latest album from the rejuvenated Red Hot Chili Peppers. It's their most successful album yet, topping the hit parades all over the world and turning platinum in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan and the USA, and gold in almost all European countries.

Apparently the title came out of a visit by singer Anthony Kiedis to Borneo. He was surprised to see the local culture saturated with images from the US, and California in particular, whether it was Coca-Cola, Marlboro, and Hollywood movies, or T-shirts, posters, CDs and cassettes from Californian bands (including the Red Hot Chili Peppers themselves). *Californication* is therefore a wonderfully appropriate and prescient title. There's also the sleazy double entendre there, fitting for a band who are famous for hitting the stage virtually naked with each band member's member sheathed in a gym sock!

Genuine worldwide fame found the band in 1991 when the *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* album lifted them onto the international stage. It was also their first collaboration with the legendary Rick Rubin, founder of the rock and rap label Def Jam Records in the mid '80s, and now head of American Recordings. Rick came on board again for *Californication*, an album that many suspected would never happen.

The trouble began when their guitarist John Frusciante descended into a journey of drug-induced self-destruction. Four years later several near miracles have happened. Frusciante is off drugs, has a new set of teeth, some skin grafts on his arms and clearly still knows how to play the guitar. He has also joined singer Anthony Kiedis, bassist Flea and drummer Chad Smith to resurrect the Chili Peppers, and together they have created an engaging album. Most of the tracks have a high-energy rock vibe, but they're interspersed with many touching ballads, of which *Scar Tissue* became a monster hit.

*Californication's* engineer Jim Scott has an impressively long list of credits to his name, including Natalie Merchant, Lucinda Williams, Counting Crows, Tom Petty, Neil Young, Rolling Stones, Finn Brothers, Robbie Robertson, Sting, Santana, Seal, and Jewel. Scott was responsible for capturing the sound and energy of the Chili Peppers onto tape. He has done a remarkable job, resulting in a hard-hitting and gritty sounding album. It's also an album that largely in mono, and without reverb, but more on that later...

**PT:** *Jim, could you take the story of recording Californication from the beginning?*

**JS:** After the return of John Frusciante there was a long period of song writing and time for the band to re-acquaint themselves with their songs. The band rehearsed most of the 1998 summer in Flea's garage,

and when they came to the recording studio they were very well prepared, and in extremely good shape. They actually started work with another recording engineer, but after a week in the studio they felt things weren't happening. As luck would have it, I happened to be working in an adjacent studio in Ocean Way (now Cello Recording) in Los Angeles. I've worked with Rick Rubin before, so he asked me to step in.

After I took over, Rick and the Peppers became happy with the sound, but all I really did was capture the sound of the band in the room. On the first day we recorded maybe three or four tracks, the next day twice as many, and the next day another four or five. In all, we recorded 30 songs in about a week, which is a lot. It was a lot of tape and a lot of performances, but they were playing great, so all we had to do was get it down.

**PT:** *Can you give us more detail about the setup in the recording studio, and what you recorded? Where they all in one room, for example?*

**JS:** We recorded all four of them at the same time, which basically amounts to the sound of the album. There weren't many overdubs. John did some guitar overdubs on maybe two or three songs (the slide guitar on Scar Tissue is overdubbed, for example), but in today's world of overdubs that's not a lot. We also overdubbed some AC/DC-type piano power chords during the mix, but it is not like there's layers and layers of overdubs. The sound of the record is what happened during that first week of recording, and those 'live' drums, bass and guitar went on every song.

We set up in Studio Two at Cello Recording, which is a rectangular, medium-sized room. The drums were on a riser in the middle of the room, and there was one large iso-booth where we put John and Flea's amplifiers – just to keep them out of the drum room. We built a little doghouse around the bass speakers, to protect them from leakage from the guitar amp – but in my experience leakage is not an issue as long as you make at least some attempt to achieve separation.

There was also a small, separate vocal booth, where Anthony sang. Flea, John and Chad were about 10 feet away from each other in a circle, and Anthony was just a few feet away in this iso-booth, separated by glass. They could see each other all the time. There were no baffles around the drums, so they were just sounding out loud in the room. I set up two room microphones, but I didn't end up using them. The sound of the drums on the album is pretty close, and that's from only using the close mics. Chad has good sounding drums, and you can hear the dynamics and the details in his grooves, so it was just a matter of getting that on tape. The same with Flea, who has great bass technique, and even when he plays fast you can still hear all the notes. Because they all

played so well, and because of the way I miked them, the overall sound was dry and punchy. Everything was clear and loud.

**PT:** *How did you mic up the drums?*

**JS:** To get that tight 'up front' sound you have to put the mics really close to the drums – the room sound did not come into it. On some records all you want is the room sound, and you get that great Led Zeppelin drum sound, but Rick prefers things to sound really loud and right in your face. He doesn't want the mic 30 feet away if it can be just one foot away.

The microphone setup was a basic rock'n'roll approach that I learnt in The Record Plant in the '80s, nothing too fancy. I used a Neumann U47 on the kick, putting it right inside. There were two Sennheiser 421 mics on the toms, two Neumann U87 mics as overheads, and a Shure SM57 on the hi-hat. The snare was picked up by two SM57s – one above and one underneath – plus a Neumann KM84 on top, which gave me a good-mic/bad-mic setup. The three snare mics all ended up on one track. The SM57 underneath the snare gave me more of the rattle.

We had a second set of drums in the room which were tuned completely differently, kind of mismatched and oversized. We used it on the track Porcelain. It had more rattle on the snare drum, a fluffier sound on the kick, plus a sizzle cymbal. I used leftover microphones for that kit. I think there was an SM57 on the snare, an Electrovoice RE20 on the kick, and two RCA77 ribbon microphones as a general drum balance. I also had a pair of Neumann M50 mics in the room for ambience on both drum kits. Although they went to tape, I didn't use them in the mix.

**Waxing lyrical:** *Jim Scott (sporting the white shirt) in the studio*



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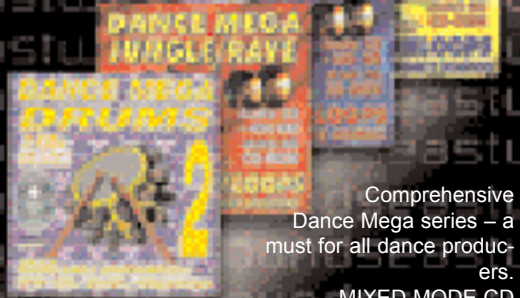
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**PT:** Did any of the vocals recorded during that first week make it to the mix?

**JS:** We probably retained some of the 'live' vocals, but Anthony went back and redid most things. In many cases this was because of changes to the lyrics. We recorded his vocal overdubs in the small iso-booth as well. He came in every day around three o'clock to get ready for the vocal overdubs, which normally started at four. He had his vocal teacher down every day, and took his time to warm up. The dedication of Anthony and the band to get this record the best they could was awesome. Anthony sang about three or four songs every day, and then we would spend time picking and choosing the best pieces. He sang great – I think it's the best he's ever sung.

The vocal overdubs took about two weeks. The whole recording period took about five weeks, after which the mixing took a few weeks, largely because Rick wasn't always available to listen to the mixes.

**PT:** Can you run through the other mics you used on the album?

**JS:** The bass went DI into the desk, and I also miked up the bass amps with a Neumann U47 tube microphone. I usually mix a 50/50 blend of DI and speaker mic to one track. I find that it's important to have the sound of moving air on the bass. Moreover, sometimes there's distortion on the bass that comes from the pick-up, but it sounds much nicer when it's gone through an amp and a speaker.

For the guitar I used two Shure SM57s and two Neumann U87s, one of each on each cabinet. Again, it's a good mic/bad mic combination. All four went down on one track, and together they made a nice big guitar sound. Anthony always used a Shure SM57 for lead vocals. We put the mic on a stand, but I'm sure he held it in his hand, and leant on it and swallowed it – that's how he gets his sound. But, it meant that it was important to compress him, in order to protect the tape.

The backing vocals were almost entirely done by John, although Flea and Anthony sang a few parts as well. I usually used a Neumann U87, but sometimes, on the spur of the moment, if John had an idea that he wanted to try out quickly, I would have him sing into Anthony's SM57. Over the years I have discovered that you gain little from auditioning 25 microphones when you know you already have a good sound – just record the good sound and get it over with. Don't turn each session into a recording school, it's more important to get the ideas down while they're hot.

**PT:** What was the console you were using for the session?

**JS:** As I said, we recorded the album at Ocean Way Studios, which is now Cello Recording. I like to work there because it has the best rock'n'roll microphone collection in the world, plus many vintage Neve modules and vintage analogue tape recorders. The album was recorded using a '70s Neve 8038 desk, on an Ampex 124 24-track, of which there are hardly any left in the world. We didn't use any Dolby. We like hiss, hiss is our friend. Listen to any record from The Who, and it's full of hiss. The Neve has excellent mic preamps, so I used them. All other mic preamps are trying to be Neves in my opinion, so it was good to have the real thing.

This particular desk had the Neve 1073 EQs, and I used quite a bit of EQ while recording. There's a huge difference between what somebody hears in a recording room – where a 500w guitar amp is blowing his hair back – and what he hears in the control room, where the same sound comes out of a speaker only six inches high. So you have to put everything in its place, and make sure it feels and sounds right. The way to do that is by using EQ and compression, or anything else you can lay your hands on. For this reason I added mostly mid-range to the electric guitar, between 1k and 2k, as well as a lot of low end – the Neve EQ gives you 56Hz and 100Hz settings, so it was probably around 100Hz that I was doing the boosting. It is good to add low end to guitars, because under the disguise of sounding exciting, they can easily get small and thin. It may jump out of the speakers, but it's not big any more.

I compressed John's guitar with a Urei 1176 as I recorded it. I didn't do much else to it, because most of the sound comes from his fingers. John uses a few pedals, but he's not really a pedal guy. He starts with a guitar, a cable and an amp – we were never waiting for him to set up his sound. He and Flea played fairly loud, which of course created amplifier compression. John has amazing control of his own dynamics. On a track like Get On Top his guitar sound would go from

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huge to tiny in one instant. That's all pretty much done live, and it's nothing to do with me. It's what made this record really easy to record, they were really ready to go. Flea was a case in point. That distorted bass sound that opens the album comes simply from the way he hit the bass guitar. I didn't do anything to that. Flea never went to his amp to change anything, and used the same bass for the whole album, apart from

on *Road Trippin'*, where he played an acoustic bass. I compressed his DI and his amp bass sound with Teletronix LA2A tube compressors. I don't think I added much EQ, apart from maybe a little bottom end, around 56Hz. I don't remember adding any mid or upper mid range for clarity, because he sounded clear. I really want to stress that these guys are great musicians. I have seen them go through highs and lows, but right now they're really good. I think they're the best band around right now.

***PT: What about the processing on the vocals and the drums?***

**JS:** The compressor I used on Anthony's vocals was a Urei 1176. Everybody uses that one. Even though my records can sound fairly radical, I don't overdo things with the settings. I used a pretty standard setting: 4:1 ratio, with fast attack and slow release, just enough compression to do the job. I printed his vocal with compression, it was simply part of the sound.

There was a lot of EQ as I recorded the drums, to that classic old rock'n'roll vibe. Personally, I think you can find the sound of rock drums on the faceplate of an API EQ – add a lot of 5k and 100Hz, and there's your drum sound! I also used the Neve EQ, but it was the same concept. I added a lot of low end to the kick drum and the toms, probably around 50Hz, and some top to the snare and cymbals, just enough to make it pretty.

***PT: There's also an acoustic guitar on This Velvet Glove, and on Road Trippin', plus some keyboards on some tracks.***

**JS:** My usual set up for acoustic guitar is to use a Neumann U87 and an AKG 452, once again the good mic/bad mic idea. Between the two you can find the ideal sound, and you can get brightness and fullness. You don't want the mics to be too close because the sound will get boomy, so I place them a couple of feet away, pointing just above or just below the sound hole. Unless you want a Jumpin' Jack Flash sound, acoustic guitars just need to be pretty. I combined these two mics on one track. We recorded the acoustic piano during the mix at The Village in LA. We went for a Beatles-style *A Day In The Life* kind of thing: using one mic that's compressed real hard, to make the sound cut through. I used one U87, not too close to the piano or the hammers. We wanted the sound to have a lot of ring, and got a lot of attack from using EQ and a compressor – in this case a Urei 1176, with a lot of input gain and a very slow release time, so the sound almost gets louder as it sustains.

***PT: How many tracks did you eventually end up with?***

**JS:** I ran two synchronised Ampex 124 24-track machines. One of the machines was really a vocal slave. On the main machine I had around 10 tracks of drums: kick, snare, stereo toms, stereo overheads, hi-hat, stereo room, and then I'd usually print a compressed drum track. I took a little bit of all the drums and ran them into a compressor, compressed it firmly and then printed it on a track. It makes the rough mixes sound a little bit more exciting. Often there was also some percussion, like tambourines and so on. The second 24-track enabled us to put down lots and lots of lead and backing vocals. We then transferred these tracks to ProTools, to experiment and edit and slide things around and archive them. It's much faster to do vocal composites in ProTools than on analogue tape. And when we wanted to run the changes past Rick, it's easier to do it in digital, all the while keeping a map where parts came from, so you can later retrieve it from the analogue tape.



**PT:** So apart from vocal comping, you're not a big fan of digital?

**JS:** I do prefer analogue, but I'll do my work any way I can. I'll use any tool. We were able to make decisions about where the good stuff was more quickly by using ProTools, but I do think you are shooting yourself in the foot by using digital all the way.

**PT:** So what can you tell us about the mix?

**JS:** I mixed on a Neve as well, using Flying Fader automation. I actually ran the two 24-tracks during the mix, to be able to get back to the original source tracks. By the end we had bounced the best bits down to single tracks. In terms of effects, the mix was totally dry. I didn't add any reverb, and very few other effects. We used a human compressor on the vocal, i.e. we kept our finger on the fader, making sure Anthony stayed in the mix, which the automation really helped with. But the tape sounded good, and had sounded good since the first day, so there was no reason to change that. It wasn't like there was anything to fix in the mix. All I had to do was balance it correctly and make it really loud. There wasn't much re-EQing either.

*Cello Recording's Studio 2, where the recording of Californication took place. The console is a custom Neve 80-series Class A, 24-bus model, with 40 inputs and 1073 EQ/channel amplifiers with GML moving fader automation.*

We had an exciting drum sound, so why fiddle with it?

My main concern while mixing was to build the tracks in

the right way, so that each chorus would get successively louder and the dynamic of the song would get more intense as the song progressed. I also added a bit of bottom end and a little top to the overall stereo mix, just to make it more hi-fi. You can ruin records by trying to make them sound too big. If you add a lot of low end it may just slow the record down, and it will start to wallow in its own size – Chili Peppers records need to be spritely and funky. I used quite a lot of Neve 33609 compression on the stereo mix, to add punch. We mixed to various digital formats (Apogee DAT, regular DAT, 96k DA88) and analogue two-track. We compared the results, and ended up using the 30ips, no Dolby analogue two-track.

**PT:** Apart from the last track, Road Trippin', and the odd panned guitar overdub and toms, most of the record sounds rather mono. Why?

**JS:** Yeah, it's all dry and mono – quite a daring record really! Mono helps to keep things loud. I think Rick decided that he didn't suddenly want something blasting from the left channel on this record. We just wanted to hear the songs. We tried panning the guitars left and right, but whenever we did, it was like, 'it sounds better in the middle, let's just leave it in the middle'. When there's some really great guitar going on, it can be right behind the vocal. The record is bass, drums, guitar and a singer – it's not that complicated. It sounded best in one big mono.



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