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A new beginning for the Chili Peppers

After a rough patch, the veteran L.A. band is back with a new guitarist and a new album due out this month.

By Steve Appleford, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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The first day of rehearsals was another momentous occasion for the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It was fall 2009, more than three years since the band last toured, and the rockers were beginning the hard work of rebirth with a new guitarist, Josh Klinghoffer. Singer Anthony Kiedis was already en route when he got a disheartening text: Brendan Mullen, local rock club impresario and author, had died of a stroke while celebrating his 60th birthday.

Mullen was a friend but also much more. In 1983, he gave the young Chili Peppers a crucial break in their fledgling career, booking them to play Club Lingerie in Hollywood after Kiedis and bassist Flea played him their demo tape on a boombox while they danced. Mullen saw something in their crazed punk-funk fusion. Decades later, Mullen was writing an oral history on the Chili Peppers, spending long hours interviewing and reminiscing on their shared histories, but now he was gone.

At rehearsal, the mood was grim. "It was sort of a sad hello," Klinghoffer remembers of that first day. "Everybody lost a good friend."

Within the first hour were the beginnings of something called "Brendan's Death Song." It appears on the band's new album, "I'm With You," and starts with a melancholic vocal and acoustic guitar that builds toward a stormy instrumental break true to the emotion of Mullen's days as a central figure in the original L.A. punk scene. "Let me live," sings Kiedis, "so when it's time to die, even the reaper cries."

In a remembrance published in The Times days later, Flea described Mullen as "an intellectual, a musician, a writer, a partier and a regular dude." He also represented a punk-rock community that first inspired and then embraced the Chili Peppers as they carried forward the ethos of that Hollywood underground as a multiplatinum rock band. "I really looked up to X and the Weirdos and the Germs," Flea, 48, says today of that scene. "They were mythological heroes to me. I felt like it was a great duty and responsibility for me to hold up that end of the bargain, to be a good L.A. band."

That mission required another new beginning during the making of "I'm With You," to be released Aug. 30 by Warner Bros. Its 14 songs document a veteran band expanding its voice with the arrival of Klinghoffer, a

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sometime sideman for PJ Harvey and Beck, who became a Chili Pepper after the exit of guitarist John Frusciante. The new album comes a full five years after the band's last release, the two-disc "Stadium Arcadium," the Chili Peppers' first No. 1 album and the winner of five Grammy Awards.

"It feels like a new band," says Rick Rubin, producer of all Chili Peppers albums since "Blood Sugar Sex Magik" in 1991. "The time off reinvigorated them, and they were hungry to write music."

The results are both familiar and unpredictable, from the straight-ahead funk of "Look Around" to the bright, euphoric piano romp "Happiness Loves Company." There is "Monarchy of Roses," a disco/metal mutation that began as a Flea-Klinghoffer jam, and includes a vocal message that explores "the psyche of friendships within a city," says Kiedis, "and the way your connection with different circles of people can really influence your life."

Lyrics swing sharply from messages of hope to the eternal challenge of human entanglements, as the music wanders with a new buoyancy through sounds funky, jazzy and dreamy, and sudden instrumental jams that are some of the best, most startling moments of the album. The result owes much to the textural, layered approach of Klinghoffer. "Josh kind of creeps up on you," says Flea, who was born Michael Balzary. "He'll rock violently — it's not that. But he's just more subtle."

The new guy

Klinghoffer hasn't been a rock star long. With his first album as a Chili Pepper now behind him, he curls up in a chair on the back patio of a Venice Beach photography studio, smiling, unshaven and bundled up. He's here to be photographed for the cover of a guitar magazine, and inside is his colorful collection of vintage Sears guitars. Today marks his second interview ever.

Sitting beside him is Kiedis, 48, wearing a trucker hat for the punk band Off!, and a seemingly calmer, more self-contained presence than during the band's frantic first decade. "Were we impolite?" he asks with a knowing grin. "We had our moments. We were very immature lads."

When the Chili Peppers returned from the lengthy "Stadium Arcadium" tour in 2007, the mood was dark, and the quartet agreed to take an open-ended break. Within months, Frusciante — an essential writer and player for nearly two decades in and out of the band — had quit permanently.

"We had been working hard and we were physically and emotionally chipped away," says Kiedis. "I stayed out on tour with broken bones in my feet from jumping off the bass drum — which is kind of agonizing, and it led to me being in a bad state of mind. John had become disenchanted with being in a touring rock band, which is completely understandable. He's a driven person in the world of music and sound, and he wanted to change gears."

Ever since, Frusciante has followed an experimental path, releasing a concept album, "The Empyrean," in 2009, and exploring other alliances, including one with the electronic trio Speed Dealer Moms. Last year, he appeared on "Sepulcros de Miel" as part of the Omar Rodríguez-López Quartet, continuing his partnership with the Mars Volta guitarist.

The hiatus lasted more than three years. Kiedis became a father and learned to surf. Flea explored a series of side projects, recording or touring with Thom Yorke, Damon Albarn and Patti Smith, while running his nonprofit school, the Silverlake Conservatory of Music. Drummer Chad Smith, 49, formed Chickenfoot (with Sammy Hagar, Joe Satriani and Michael Anthony) and recorded a children's album with Dick Van Dyke.

Frusciante's departure wasn't publicly known, and it was hardly the band's first season of turmoil. The original Chili Peppers quartet of friends from Fairfax High was shattered by the 1988 heroin overdose of guitarist Hillel Slovak and the grief-stricken exit of drummer Jack Irons. Those next years saw a series of comings and goings, including one player who threatened to burn down Kiedis' house, and an uneasy period with Jane's Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro. All of it swirled around the creative core of Flea and Kiedis, who ultimately found their greatest, most lasting successes with Frusciante and Smith.

After Frusciante quit the first time in 1992, and returned almost six years later, Flea was certain he would never want to continue the band without him. "Then he left, and a few months went by and I really missed it," says Flea.

The band now sought a new way forward. Years earlier, Kiedis had first heard of Klinghoffer during a visit to a friend, singer Bob Forrest, who raved about the guitarist in his new band, the Bicycle Thief. Kiedis liked what he heard. "Bob has always had a very keen sensibility about finding extremely talented and down-to-earth people who just want to get to a kitchen and write a song," says Kiedis.

The Chili Peppers took the Bicycle Thief on tour in 2000, and Klinghoffer later joined them as backup guitarist and keyboardist, and appeared on several Frusciante solo recordings. "I've always been attracted to the idea of a tight-knit unit, a band of family, a brotherhood," says Klinghoffer, 31, who grew up in the San Fernando Valley. "Since my earliest memory, they always seemed like a band with a lot of love for each other."

Kiedis compares the recruiting of Klinghoffer to the "concept of eating local produce. . . . No trucking, no shipping, no pesticides. Just your own friend from the neighborhood who happens to be a person you really want to play music with." By 2009, Klinghoffer was a Chili Pepper.

The new lineup begins a major U.S. tour in early 2012, but locals can find them Aug. 22 at the intimate Roxy Theatre (taped by Fuse TV for broadcast on the album's release date) and at an Aug. 24 benefit at Club Nokia for the Silverlake Conservatory.

"It's never going to be too perfect, thank God," says Kiedis. "We're just four guys who get together and write and listen to each other. I get excited about things that Josh brings into the rehearsal, and I can tell it's coming from a place that I can relate to. It's not coming from a phony place."

Video time

The sweltering warehouse in downtown Los Angeles looks like a party, with a young crowd in short skirts, tights, bare midriffs and fishnets. Sitting on a couch is a woman in pigtails with a goat, as a camera crew captures the moment for a music video of "The Adventures of Rain Dance Maggie."

Directing is the 21-year-old rapper Kreayshawn, whose streetwise video for her "Gucci Gucci" is a YouTube sensation of the moment. As her crew huddles around the video monitors, the Chili Peppers climb to the stage ready to perform to the "Maggie" album track. By the second take, the band's energy level rises with the heat: Kiedis does a one-armed handstand, and Flea spits water on his chest.

This is Klinghoffer's very first music video, and the scene reminds him of another one from the '90s, when a different band rocked extra-hard for a roiling crowd of overamped kids. He plucks the melody from Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" on his guitar and shares a laugh with Kiedis. "That's what it feels like," he says of these moments on camera.

In a few weeks, the band will shoot another video for the same song, with the group performing on a Venice rooftop. The setting changes nothing about the tune, which began as a lurking bassline Flea wrote in his kitchen before evolving into a pop song of brooding funk, glancing guitar, cowbell and a Kiedis rhyme that purrs: "Tugboat Sheila is into memorabilia/Who said three is a crowd?"

"Flea and I are childhood friends, and we have a weird spiritual bond," Kiedis says of their lifelong collaboration. "We have a brotherly relationship that comes with a lot of angst, but . . . we really love what we started and we never stopped loving it. There's been nothing in the way of enthusiasm that's diminished. I listened to our record yesterday, and I feel our new band with Josh is as good as we've ever been."

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