

interview

jim
scottRECORDING THE RED HOT CHILI
PEPPERS' CALIFORNICATION

mono mania

JIM SCOTT • RECORDING THE RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS' CALIFORNICATION

A hugely successful new album marks The Red Hot Chili Peppers' return to form - and incredibly, it's nearly all in mono. Engineer Jim Scott talks to **Paul Tingen** about the recording process and the group's refreshingly direct approach to production and mixing.



There are many signs that the 'Californication' of the world is in full swing, but recently there's been a major accessory to the global takeover, in the form of the latest album from the resuscitated Red Hot Chili Peppers. It's the band's most successful album to date, going platinum in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan and the USA, and gold in Britain and almost all European countries. Apparently the title arose from a visit by singer Anthony Kiedis to Borneo. He was surprised to see the local culture saturated with images from California, whether they were of Coca-Cola, Marlboro and Hollywood movies, or T-shirts, posters, CDs and cassettes from Californian bands such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers. *Californication* is therefore a wonderfully prescient title, and the *double entendre* is fitting for a band who regularly spice up their lyrics, stage act and videos with explicit sexual imagery.

Of course, the Los Angeles funk, rock and rap band have known commercial success before, with their 1991 album *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* establishing them on the international stage. It was also their first with legendary producer Rick Rubin, who produced Slayer, Danzig, the Beastie Boys and AC/DC, and who has more recently worked with Donovan, Johnny Cash and Tom Petty. In 1995, he helped the Chili Peppers again with *One Hot Minute*, but after this the band sank into relative obscurity, their guitarist John Frusciante descending into drug-induced self-destruction.

Four years later, several near-miracles have happened. Frusciante, who few believed would survive, is now off the drugs, has a new set of teeth, some skin grafts on his arms and clearly still knows how to play the guitar. Moreover, he has resurrected the Chili Peppers with singer Kiedis, bassist Flea and drummer Chad Smith. Their engaging new album has a high-energy rock vibe interspersed with some touching ballads, of which 'Scar Tissue' has become a monster hit. Rick Rubin was once again in the producer's chair, with Los Angeles engineer/producer Jim Scott at the controls.

Like Rubin, the 47-year old Scott has an impressively long list of credits to his name, having worked with Natalie Merchant, Lucinda Williams, Counting Crows, Tom Petty, Neil Young,

the Rolling Stones, the Finn Brothers, Robbie Robertson, Sting, Santana, Seal and Jewel. Scott has done a remarkable job of capturing the sound and energy of the Chili Peppers, resulting in a hard-hitting and gritty-sounding album. And those who have listened to the album in detail will have noticed a few peculiarities: most of it is in good old mono, and there's hardly any reverb. The result is a very compact, punchy sound.

Loud And Clear

Speaking from his home in Los Angeles, Jim Scott was more than happy to divulge interesting details about the recording process, where other engineers can be rather evasive. Taking the story from the beginning, he remembered: "After the return of John Frusciante there was a long period of song re-acquainting and songwriting. The band rehearsed for most of the Summer of 1998 in Flea's garage, and when they came to the recording studio they were very well prepared. They started recording with another engineer, but after a week they felt that things weren't happening. As luck would have it, I happened to be working in an adjacent studio called Cello Recording [*formerly Western Recorders*] in Los Angeles, so Rick asked me to step in, as I've worked with him before. After I started working with them the Peppers became happy with the sound, but all I did was simply capture the sound of the band in the room. We recorded 30 songs in about a week, which is a lot of tape and a lot of performances. But they were playing great, so all we had to do was get it down. The only thing that might have changed during the recording was the song structure, but Rick has his way of working with the band and they really trust his judgement.

"We recorded all four of them at the same time, which is basically the sound of the album. John did guitar overdubs, maybe two or three on some of the songs, but in the world of overdubs that's not a lot. The slide guitar on 'Scar Tissue' is overdubbed, for example. I don't think he ever went back and replaced a whole guitar track, and Flea might only have replaced a few small sections. We also added some AC/DC-style piano power chords during the mix, but it is not like there are layers and layers of overdubs. The sound of the record is what happened during that first week of recording. These 'live' drums, bass and guitar went on every song."

According to Scott, Cello Recording was another important ingredient in the making of the album. He likes to record there, because "it has the best rock & roll microphone collection in the world, and they collect vintage Neve consoles and vintage analogue tape recorders." Their setup in Studio 2, a medium-sized rectangular room, also helped to create a certain sound. Scott elaborated: "The drums were on a riser in the middle, and there was one large isolation booth where we put John's 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 the guitar amp. But leakage isn't really that much of a problem. In my experience it is not an issue as long as you make at least an attempt to have some 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 pretty small circle, and Anthony was just a few more feet away in his booth, easily visible through the 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 use them, so the sound of the drums is pretty close. Chad has good-sounding drums, and you can hear the dynamics and the details in his groove, so it was just a matter of getting that on tape.

The same with Flea, who has great bass technique - 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 whole sound was dry and punchy. Everything is loud and clear."



Get It While It's Hot

So how then, exactly, did Jim mike things? This is the point where a certain reticence often sets in, as if many engineers want to protect their own trade secrets. Perhaps they wish to maintain a mystique, or maybe they just prefer talking primarily about the intangibles of a job that requires both technical and artistic skills. Scott did protest a few times that he used no more than run-of-the-mill settings, but he was

nonetheless happy to spell things out: "To get a tight, upfront sound you have to put the mics really close to the drums. The room sound does not come into it. On some records all you want is room sound, so you get that great Led Zeppelin drum sound. But Rick prefers things to sound really loud and right in your face. He does not want the mic 30 feet away if it can be just one foot away. The microphone setup was a basic rock & roll approach that I learnt in The Record Plant in the '80s, nothing too fancy.

"I used a Neumann U47 on the kick drum, putting it right inside. There were two Sennheiser MD421s on the toms, two Neumann U87s as overheads, and an Shure SM57 on the hi-hat. The snare was picked up by two SM57 mics, one above it and one underneath it, plus a Neumann KM84 on top, which gave me a good-mic/bad-mic setup: between the two you can find the ideal sound, and you can get brightness and fullness. The three snare mics all ended up on one track. The SM57 underneath the snare gave me more of the rattle of the snare drum. Especially in soul ballads the snare rattle is a really beautiful sound, but Chad plays a little too fast to use much of it. We had a second set of drums in the room, which was tuned completely differently, kind of mismatched and oversized. We used that on the track 'Porcelain'. It had more rattle on the snare drum, and a fluffier-sounding kick drum, plus a sizzle cymbal. Because of the nature of the room there was more room for these sounds. I used microphone left-overs for that kit. I think there was an SM57 on the snare drum, an Electrovoice RE20 on the kick drum, and two RCA77 ribbon microphones as a general drum balance. I also had a pair of Neumann M50s in the room for ambience on both drum kits, but although they went to tape, I didn't use them in the mix."

"Mono helps to keep things loud. We decided that we didn't want things suddenly blasting from the left channel on this record. Why would we want that? We just wanted to hear the songs."

Scott went into detail about the guitars, bass and vocals too: "The bass went DI into the desk, and I also recorded his amp speakers 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 pickup, but it sounds much nicer when it's gone through an amp and a speaker. For the guitar I used two SM57 and two U87 microphones, one of each on each cabinet - again the good-mic/bad-mic combination. All four went down on one track, and together they made a nice big guitar sound.

"Anthony always used an SM57 for his lead vocals. We put it 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 90 percent done by John, although Flea and Anthony sang a few parts as well.

Most of the time I used a U87 on John and Flea, but sometimes, if John had an idea that he wanted to try out quickly, I would have him sing into Anthony's mic. Over the years I have discovered that you gain little from auditioning 25 microphones, when you have a good sound. Just record the good sound and get it over with. It's not recording school every day - it's more important to get these ideas down while they're hot."

Magic

As if he was worried about taking too much credit, Scott kept stressing that all he really did was record the band performing together. There was genuine admiration in his voice when he said: "These guys are such great players. I have seen them go through highs and lows, but right now they're really good. I think they are the best band around right now. The dedication of the band to get this record the best they could was awesome. Anthony came in every day around three o'clock to get ready for the vocal overdubs that normally started at four. He had his vocal teacher down every day, and took his time to warm up, so he sang great. I think it's the best he ever sang. We probably retained some of Anthony's 'live' vocals of that first week, but he was the only one who went back and redid most things, in many cases because of lyric updates. We recorded his vocal overdubs in the same small isolation booth. Anthony sang three or four songs every day, and then we would spend time picking and choosing the best pieces. The vocal overdubs took about two weeks. The whole recording period took about five weeks, followed by a few weeks mixing, because Rick wasn't always available to listen to the mixes."

So the band sounded great, and the microphone setup was 'basic' rock & roll. What then about the signal path and effects? Scott: "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. They're both real vintage machines, and sound great. We didn't use any Dolby. We like hiss. Hiss is our friend. Listen to a Who record, it's full of hiss. The Neve has excellent mic preamps, so I used them. All other mic preamps are trying to be Neves. 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 someone hears in a recording room, where a 500W guitar amp is blowing their hair back, and 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, or compression, or anything else you can lay your hands on.

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"To get things to sound great in the control room, I added mostly mid-range to the electric guitar, between 1kHz and 2kHz, as well as a lot of low end. The Neve EQ gives you 56Hz and 100Hz, so it was probably around 100Hz. 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 anymore. John played fairly loud, which of course created amplifier compression, but I also compressed John's guitar with a Urei 1176 as I recorded it. I didn't do much else to it. Most of the sound comes from his fingers. He 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. And he had amazing control of his own dynamics. On a track like 'Get On Top' his guitar sound would go from huge to tiny in an instant. That's all pretty much done live, and it's not me. It's what made this record really easy to record.

"The same with Flea. 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', on which he played an acoustic bass. I compressed his DI and his amp sound with 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."

No Retro

Moving on to the treatments for vocals and drums, Scott explained that the compressor he used on Kiedis' vocals, which were overly dynamic because of his tendency to eat the mic, 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 real stock setting, 4:1 ratio, with fast attack, slow release and just enough compression to do the job. I printed his vocal with compression, it was simply part of the sound. I recorded the drums with a lot of EQ. Classic old rock & roll stuff as well. I think you can find the sound of rock drums etched onto the face of an API EQ. You add a lot of 5kHz and 100Hz, and there's your drum sound. I 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 at around 50Hz, and some top to the snare and cymbals, just enough to make it pretty."

In many ways it seems as if the recording of *Californication* was done with the creative application of some '60s and '70s techniques. But, delving more deeply, it turned out that the album wasn't specifically made in retro fashion, but that modern tools were also used. The reason is that they ended up working with 48 tracks, which is remarkable, given that the foundation of the album was laid by three guys playing in a room and that there were few instrumental overdubs. Scott: "I eventually ran two synchronised Ampex 124 machines. One of the machines was really a vocal slave. On the main machine I would have around 10 tracks of drums: kick, snare, stereo toms, stereo overheads, hi-hat, stereo room, and I usually printed a compressed drum submix as well - it makes the rough mixes sound a little bit more exciting. There was also often 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 Pro Tools, to be able to experiment and edit and slide things around and archive them. It's much faster to do vocal composites like that than on analogue, especially when we wanted to run the changes past Rick. You can keep a map of where parts came from, so you can later retrieve them from the analogue originals."

The Big Mono

The mention of Pro Tools, especially when used in Cello Recording, an environment that's so geared towards classic and vintage gear, brings up the digital-versus-analogue debate. Scott appears to find the whole discussion a waste of time: "I do prefer analogue, but I'll do my work any way I can. I'll use any tool. I think you are shooting yourself in the foot by

Unplugged, But Still Red Hot...

The sounds on *Californication* are mainly electric, but on the tracks 'This Velvet Glove' and 'Road Trippin' acoustic guitar can be heard. Moreover, a few tracks feature the aforementioned acoustic piano. Scott described his approach to recording these: "My usual setup for acoustic guitar is to use a Neumann U87 and an AKG C452, once again the good-mic/bad-mic idea. 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: one mic compressed really hard, to make the sound cut through. I used a U87, not too close to the piano or the hammers. We wanted the sound to have a lot of ring, and we 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."


using digital all the way, but we were able to make quicker decisions about where the good stuff was by using Pro Tools."

Scott clearly belongs to the pragmatic rather than the ideological camp, and this shows in the way he mixed the album, most of all because much of it turned out dry and in mono. Nowadays, it's either a very brave or a very crazy thing to do, but he appears to have pulled it off, given the success of the album - Warner Brothers may have trouble adapting it for 5.1 surround sound, however! Scott described the mixing process from the beginning: "Our starting point was that 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 right and make it really loud. So mixing was easy. My main concern was to build the tracks right, so that each chorus got successively louder and so that the dynamic of the song got more intense as the song progressed. I mixed the album on the Neve at The Village in LA, using Flying Faders automation. I 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.

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"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 - we kept our finger on the fader - making sure Anthony stayed in the mix. Automation is a wonderful help with this. There wasn't much re-EQing either. We had an exciting drum sound, so why fiddle with it? I used quite a lot of Neve 33609 compression on the stereo mix, to add punch, and I added a bit of bottom and a little top to the overall stereo mix, just to make it more hi-fi. Chili Peppers records need to be sprightly and funky, and you can ruin records by trying to make them sound too

big. If you add a lot of low end, you can slow the record down, and it starts to wallow in its own size. We mixed to various digital formats (Apogee DAT, regular DAT, 96K DA88) and analogue 2-track, compared everything, and ended up using the analogue 2-track at 30ips with no Dolby."

So what then, Mr. Scott, of the fact that most of the album is in mono, with the exception of the toms, the odd panned guitar overdub, and Melletron-esque sounds from a Chamberlin on 'Road Trippin'? The American laughed: "Yeah, dry and mono, it's quite a daring record! Mono helps to keep things loud. I think Rick decided that he didn't want things suddenly blasting from the left channel on this record. Why would we want that? We just wanted to hear the songs. We tried panning the guitars left and right, but whenever we did it, 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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