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# Sound, Society and the Geography of Popular Music

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ASHGATE

## Chapter 9

# The City She Loves Me: The Los Angeles of the Red Hot Chili Peppers

Michael W. Pesses

Let me play with your emotions / For nothing is good unless you play with it  
Yeah / Fly on / Fly on, baby ("Mommy, What's a Funkadelic," Funkadelic 1970)

### 14 Introduction

In the 1980s, the Los Angeles music scene had its share of "hair bands," but it also had a growing number of bands that resisted "glam" and began something new. *Jane's Addiction*, *Fishbone*, *FIREHOSE*, and the *Red Hot Chili Peppers* all borrowed from rock n' roll, punk rock, funk, country, jazz, and more to help launch an "alternative" sound. Their work differed from Seattle's "grunge," but both sounds contributed to a new movement in popular music (see Bell 1998 for a discussion of alternative music and the Seattle contribution). Gill states "the various trends and styles of rock derive initially from conditions specific to particular regions, with local dance and bar bands often being the principal sources of innovation and change" (1995, 17). This is the case with 1980s Los Angeles, but I would argue that the Red Hot Chili Peppers were not only a part of a regional sound, but that the place itself became a central presence in their music.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers have never hidden their relationship with Los Angeles. Bassist Michael "Flea" Balzary puts it bluntly in the band's 1999 VH1 *Behind the Music* episode, "We're L.A. to the bone." Throughout over twenty years of existence, the band has woven the physical and cultural geography of L.A. into their songs, videos, and mythos. Be it an irreverent party anthem or biting social commentary, a Red Hot Chili Pepper's song relies on Los Angeles to create context. The band uses postmodern techniques of playfulness, pastiche (that is, a compilation of influences and ideas), and acknowledges coexisting and/or competing realities. In doing so, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have produced a unique Los Angeles. At the same time, the postmodern structure (Dear and Flusty 1998) and essence (Soja 1996a) of Los Angeles (e.g. resisting traditional urban form) has, in turn, informed their music. The two are in constant dialectical tension and the result for the band has been an inherently geographic artistry.

## 1 Music, literature, and film geographies 1

2 2  
 3 A reoccurring theme in the study of music from a geographic perspective is 3  
 4 that not enough has been done to advance this perspective, or that it needs to 4  
 5 advance in a new direction (Kong 1995, Leyshon et al. 1995, Zelinsky 1999, 5  
 6 and recently Hudson 2006). Especially popular American music seems to be 6  
 7 an untapped source of geographic analysis. While there is a growing amount 7  
 8 of literature on postcolonial “world music” and the use of hybridized music for 8  
 9 tourist consumption (Connell and Gibson 2004; Gibson and Dunbar-Hall 2000; 9  
 10 Greene 2001), human geography has paid little attention to popular American 10  
 11 music since the 1970s (Ford 1971; Gill 1995). Some work exists on the genesis 11  
 12 and diffusion of particular sounds in American music (Bell 1998; Gill 1995; 12  
 13 Graves 1999; Stump 1998). Evoking place through popular music is of interest to 13  
 14 geographers, as is the thematic analysis of lyrics through a geographic lens (Kong 14  
 15 1995). Very little has been written on the role place plays as an *influence*, and even 15  
 16 as a protagonist, not simply a setting, in American popular music (however, see 16  
 17 Moss 1992; Forman 2000). This is surprising as “landscape ... provides a context, 17  
 18 a stage, within and upon which humans continue to work, and it provides the 18  
 19 boundaries, quite complexly, within which people remake themselves” (Mitchell 19  
 20 2000, 102). Furthermore, landscape is “an ongoing *relationship* between people 20  
 21 and place” (Mitchell 2000, 102, emphasis in original). 21

22 A few exceptions are Ford and Henderson (1978) who explored how images of 22  
 23 a place were shaped by music: 23

24 24  
 25 The perceived qualities of places and types of places may change with their 25  
 26 changing appropriateness for popular music themes. The hypothesis is made 26  
 27 that songs both reflect and influence the images people have of places and that 27  
 28 these songs have changed people’s attitudes significantly toward places is one 28  
 29 important step toward understanding the “geography of the mind” (Ford and 29  
 30 Henderson 1978, 292). 30  
 31 31

32 Gumprecht also studied the relationship between place and the musician in popular 32  
 33 American music in his analysis of the West Texas landscape’s influence on Joe Ely, 33  
 34 Butch Hancock, and Terry Allen. “Geographers who want to better understand the 34  
 35 cultural landscape and how humans react to it ... would be wise not only to *look*, 35  
 36 to attempt to *read* that landscape, but to *listen*, to try to *hear* what sound, including 36  
 37 music, can tell us about place” (Gumprecht 1998, 78, original emphasis). Related 37  
 38 but different work addresses the production of musical *spaces* or “soundscapes” 38  
 39 (Aitken and Craine 2002; Valentine 1995). The sounds we hear out of our car 39  
 40 stereo, over a supermarket loudspeaker, or at a concert can alter our perceptions of 40  
 41 the material landscape. These musical ‘scapes have been explored in terms of affect 41  
 42 and emotion, but specific and fixed places are rarely discussed (admittedly so in 42  
 43 Aitken and Craine 2002) in such studies. This chapter will attempt to explore both 43  
 44 44

1 mental perceptions of the Red Hot Chili Peppers' music as well as its references 1  
2 to concrete places. 2

3 Just as popular American music is rarely explored in geographic terms, when it 3  
4 comes to using sensory consumption and production of place in human geography 4  
5 in general, the sonic takes a backseat to the visual (Valentine 1995). Sight plays a 5  
6 key role in how we interpret our world, yet without sound, "space itself contracts, 6  
7 for our experience of space is greatly extended by the auditory sense which 7  
8 provides information of the world beyond the visual field" (Tuan 1974, 9). As I 8  
9 write this, I hear a bird singing outside my office, though I cannot see it. I hear 9  
10 cars in the distance, the rumble of the central heating unit, the ticking of the clock. 10  
11 Without sound, my world is much smaller. I look at the computer screen, but I hear 11  
12 lyrics about crashing surf (from the song "Road Trippin'," *Californication* 1999) 12  
13 or untouchable basketball skill (the song "Magic Johnson," *Mother's Milk* 1989). 13  
14 These lyrics and the echoing electric guitar, underlying funk bass, and almost 14  
15 tribal drums extend my space from my desk located in the San Joaquin Valley to 15  
16 the Los Angeles of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. 16

17 As visual elements are often the focus of media geographies, it is useful to 17  
18 explore studies of literature and place and film and place in an attempt to transfer 18  
19 these theories to the music of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Los Angeles. For 19  
20 example, Tuan speaks of the permanence and power of the literary text as producing 20  
21 images of place. London's literary history has managed to evoke both real and 21  
22 unreal feelings in tourists (1991, 690-691). Is Los Angeles much different? While 22  
23 literature may not always spring to mind (although fans of noir writers Raymond 23  
24 Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James Ellroy may disagree), Los Angeles has 24  
25 appeared in countless forms of popular culture. The quintessential L.A. diner plays 25  
26 a major role in the bookend scenes of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Steve 26  
27 Martin's *L.A. Story* shows the surreal and absurd sides of the city (e.g. driving to 27  
28 your mailbox). Popular music also utilizes Los Angeles as setting, from the Beach 28  
29 Boys' coastline to N.W.A.'s inner city. As these examples reveal, the same city can 29  
30 be envisioned as two completely different places based on not only the lyrics, but 30  
31 also the sonic presentations. "Straight Outta Compton" would not have had the 31  
32 same effect without the layering of Dr. Dre and Easy-E harmonizing behind Ice 32  
33 Cube's lead vocals.<sup>1</sup> 33

34 It is worth mentioning at this point that the Red Hot Chili Peppers are well 34  
35 known for their nonsensical lyrics. When Anthony Kiedis raps, "Oh ... ticky 35  
36 ticky tickita tic tac toe / I know ... everybody's Eskimo" ("Warlocks," *Stadium* 36  
37 37

38 \_\_\_\_\_ 38  
39 1 For those not familiar with the music referenced, in the 1960s, the Beach Boys used 39  
40 lyrics about Southern California's young beach culture (surfing, fast cars, and attractive 40  
41 girls) and tightly layered harmonies from the production studio for a polished sound. In 41  
42 the late 1980s, N.W.A popularized the West Coast rap scene with *Straight Outta Compton*. 42  
43 Their lyrics reflected the poverty, racism, and violence of L.A.'s inner city and the beats 43  
44 matched the rappers' rawness. See also Chapter 7 for an analysis of California imagery in 44  
45 popular music. 45

1 *Arcadium* 2006) the geographer may leap out of his or her chair with the urge to 1  
 2 slap an “air bass guitar,” but his or her discursive analytical powers are rendered 2  
 3 useless. Some of the band’s ballads contain a loose narrative structure (e.g. “Dani 3  
 4 California,” *Stadium Arcadium* 2006), but, in general, the group has maintained 4  
 5 a sense of ambiguity with regards to the meaning of their work. This ambiguity 5  
 6 provides, perhaps, a challenge to the cultural geographer. On the other hand, it 6  
 7 could be viewed as more help than hindrance. Some geographic studies of popular 7  
 8 music have conducted discursive analyses based primarily on the lyrics of an artist, 8  
 9 such as Moss’s exploration of Bruce Springsteen’s landscapes (1992). While Moss 9  
 10 does an excellent job bringing both a materialist and feminist lens to a male rock 10  
 11 legend’s work, she does not utilize a dialectical framework to investigate both the 11  
 12 object (e.g. “Born to Run”) and the processes that lead to its creation and, in turn, 12  
 13 the objects reproduction (Harvey 1996). Moss incorporates Springsteen’s life into 13  
 14 her analysis of his lyrics, but popular songs are more than just lyrics. Regardless 14  
 15 of the presence or absence of a narrative structure, the sonic choices used by the 15  
 16 artist contribute to the work. Using the aforementioned Beach Boys meet N.W.A 16  
 17 example, instrument choice, vocal style, and the very notes and rhythm chosen 17  
 18 produce the totality of the song. Whether or not Springsteen’s guitar or Clarence 18  
 19 Clemons’s saxophone would alter Moss’s findings is not the issue; she likely 19  
 20 would have come to a similar conclusion. It should be kept in mind, however, that 20  
 21 these choices, along with the social processes that brought Bruce Springsteen to 21  
 22 the recording studio, as well as the processes that bring the listener to the songs, 22  
 23 music videos, and concerts together produce the landscapes of Bruce Springsteen. 23  
 24 All of these parts constitute the totality of the spaces and places of music (Harvey 24  
 25 1996). 25

26 Additionally, in a post MTV age, where a band can provide songs, music 26  
 27 videos, documentaries, artwork, and journal entries to the fan’s home computer, 27  
 28 simply relying on the songs or albums would limit one’s understanding of the 28  
 29 overall work of art. The “webs of symbols” must be plucked not only from the 29  
 30 songs, but from the totality of the albums, videos, and overall mythos of the band 30  
 31 itself.<sup>2</sup> 31

32 32  
 33 33

### 34 **L.A.’s urban form, pop culture, and postmodernity** 34

35 35

36 I am in no way suggesting that L.A. has gone unnoticed in the geography of popular 36  
 37 culture. The use of the city in Film Noir has exposed Los Angeles’s darker side, 37  
 38 38

39 \_\_\_\_\_ 39  
 40 2 In addition to how we experience professionally produced music, new technology 40  
 41 also seems to be changing *who* we listen to. New and (somewhat) affordable software 41  
 42 are used to create a recording studio on one’s desktop computer and internet forums like 42  
 43 *YouTube* and *MySpace* are producing entirely new ways to consume music. Will music 43  
 44 scenes change? Do artists still need to live in L.A., Seattle, or Nashville? What does this 44  
 44 mean for future spaces and places of music? See Chapter 12 for insights to this question. 44

1 thus counteracting its sunny image (Hausladen and Starrs 2005). Using noir as a  
 2 stylistic framework allowed these films to express a “collective national unease”  
 3 (Hausladen and Starrs 2005, 43). Additionally, McClung (1988) has discussed how  
 4 literature (including noir) contrast images of utopia and Arcadia<sup>3</sup> against dystopia  
 5 and the city. He uses Los Angeles to show the dialectical nature of such literary  
 6 cities as they relate to our reading of the built landscape. Helen Hunt Jackson’s  
 7 1884 novel *Ramona* managed to both challenge the treatment of Native Americans  
 8 as well as shape the natural image of Southern California (DeLyser 2005). The  
 9 city’s Mediterranean climate and later its imported “natural” landscape (orange  
 10 and palm trees as opposed to desert scrub) give it a tangible sense of an Arcadian  
 11 city. Yet, literary work has typically presented the city as a “betrayed arcadia” or a  
 12 “pathetic dystopia” (McClung 1988, 34). McClung uses this dialectic as a way to  
 13 show how the real and the imagined are in tension in the making of a city such as  
 14 Los Angeles. This idea of contextualizing art and architecture to understand how  
 15 the city is imagined is relevant to this chapter. The trick, however, is to move past  
 16 the notion of the utopian/dystopian binary and embrace the multiple imaginings  
 17 and realities of the city.

18 It is my argument that the Red Hot Chili Peppers express not a national unease,  
 19 nor a straightforward critique of utopia, but rather a struggle to accept the multiple  
 20 realities of postmodern existence, which I would argue is a logical progression of  
 21 L.A. noir. Rather than simply point out “paradise with a seamy side” (Hausladen  
 22 and Starrs 2005, 60), the band embraces both worlds to show how they are not  
 23 mutually exclusive. This is not a form of hypocrisy, but rather the acknowledgement  
 24 of coexisting and competing realities. In turn, the band’s lyrical and sonic choices  
 25 are influenced by the postmodern nature of the city where they live. In other  
 26 words, the Red Hot Chili Peppers are a band presenting both a “paradise” and a  
 27 “seamy side” of the city. The band continues to show the underbelly of society  
 28 through their openness about drug addiction, death, and despair in a noir fashion,  
 29 but also addresses the global networks originating in “a Hollywood basement”  
 30 (“Californication,” *Californication* 1999). Rather than dwelling on the darker side  
 31 of Los Angeles, the band embraces it as a necessity for the existence of the city’s  
 32 good side. This is not about exposing Hollywood’s “lies,” but about coming to  
 33 terms with them and incorporating them into daily life.

34 Los Angeles is a city that defies modern notions of urbanism (Dear and Flusty  
 35 1998). In geographic discourse, it has been described as postmodern (Dear and  
 36 Flusty 1998; Soja 1989) or even deviant (Davidson and Entrikin 2005). Los Angeles  
 37 is “a peculiar composite metropolis that resembles an articulated assemblage  
 38 of many different patterns of change affecting major cities in the United States  
 39 and elsewhere in the world—a Houston, a Detroit, a Lower Manhattan, and a  
 40 Singapore amalgamated in one urban region” (Soja et al. 1983, 195-196). This  
 41 image of nontraditional urban form takes Tuan’s ideas of literary London (1991) in  
 42 a different direction. Not only can popular culture construct an unreal experience  
 43

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44 3 A term commonly used in fiction that represents idealized, idyllic rural areas.  
 45

1 of the city, but also the absence of traditional urban centers and public spaces seem 1  
 2 to produce the need for this very popular culture. 2

3 This materialist dialectic of music/place production should not, however, mask 3  
 4 the postmodern nature of the city and the music. While Soja's socio-spatial dialectic 4  
 5 (1980) is at work, the following analysis equally stress the importance of Soja's 5  
 6 work on Los Angeles as a heterogeneous city (see, for example, Soja 1996a). Soja 6  
 7 has attempted to transcend the binary constraints of the dialectic, even proposing 7  
 8 a "trialectic" approach while still encouraging geographers to move beyond three- 8  
 9 part frameworks (Soja 1996b). So, while I am suggesting that the Red Hot Chili 9  
 10 Peppers and Los Angeles are linked in a dialectic fashion, the band and the city as 10  
 11 beings, places, and spaces transcend proposed meta-narratives in true postmodern 11  
 12 fashion. As I will show, both are the amalgamation of competing and coexisting 12  
 13 realities. 13

14 The band's union of "high culture" and the vernacular into their work positions 14  
 15 them as postmodern artists (Urry 2002, 79-80). By layering an orchestra with 15  
 16 a distorted electric guitar ("Midnight," *By the Way* 2002), the band can appeal 16  
 17 to those with more cultural capital than economic capital (Urry 2002). By 17  
 18 embracing juxtaposition while rejecting a meta-narrative, the band works from 18  
 19 a postmodernist point of departure (Harvey 1990). Harvey (1990, referencing 19  
 20 McHale 1987) describes the shift from the epistemological to the ontological in 20  
 21 postmodernism; that is, interpreting and representing how we know the truth gives 21  
 22 way to a world of many intersecting and diverging truths. Leaving an idealized 22  
 23 reality out of their music, the Red Hot Chili Peppers can seamlessly attack the 23  
 24 spread of a homogenized Western culture, while touring around the world to 24  
 25 promote the same Western culture. 25

26 26  
 27 27

### 28 ***Blood Sugar Sex Magik* and "Suck My Kiss"** 28 29 29

30 The 1989 cover of Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground" (*Mother's Milk*) gave the 30  
 31 band mainstream recognition, but it was with the 1991 album *Blood Sugar Sex* 31  
 32 *Magik* that the Red Hot Chili Peppers became a powerful music presence, and, 32  
 33 I would argue, a clear postmodern turn for the band. Los Angeles was always 33  
 34 present in earlier work (e.g. "Out in L.A." and "True Men Don't Kill Coyotes," 34  
 35 *Red Hot Chili Peppers* 1984), but *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* more fully embraced 35  
 36 the band's home town. The album was created in a rented Hollywood mansion 36  
 37 where the band lived until the recording was complete. The process was captured 37  
 38 in a documentary about the album, *Funky Monks*. This was the first time acclaimed 38  
 39 producer Rick Rubin worked with the band (who continued to work with them 39  
 40 on four subsequent albums), and a certain sense of maturity is evident when 40  
 41 comparing *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* to previous efforts. While their early albums 41  
 42 did reference the city, deliberate and tangible connections to the many realities of 42  
 43 Los Angeles is first present on this album and the associated artwork and music 43  
 44 videos. It is the starting point for the postmodern geographies of the Red Hot Chili 44



1 Peppers. Previous albums used pastiche to a certain extent, but at this point in their 1  
2 discography, postmodern play becomes tangible and appears purposeful. 2

3 The song “Suck My Kiss” (*Blood Sugar Sex Magik* 1991; video at: [http://www.](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jof35Pn2cI) 3  
4 [youtube.com/watch?v=Jof35Pn2cI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jof35Pn2cI)) is a sexually charged funk anthem, although 4  
5 its sonic values alone do not necessarily produce the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Los 5  
6 Angeles. The video, however, is a mix of footage from the *Funky Monks* film 6  
7 and shots from a military parade in Los Angeles. The opening shot is a black 7  
8 and white view of the classic “Hollywood” sign, instantly invoking geography. 8  
9 Next is a red duotone shot of airplanes flying in formation above festive balloons. 9

10 A black and white Los Angeles of the vernacular is played against the “red and 10  
11 white” Los Angeles of state power. Drummer Chad Smith rides his Harley sans 11  
12 helmet through the Hollywood Hills, while uniformed soldiers march in a parade 12  
13 honoring the military; two separate images showing both disobedience and order. 13  
14 Next, shirtless bassist Flea and guitarist John Frusciante record this very song, 14  
15 bouncing and moving to the music, almost sexually; yet, almost simultaneously 15  
16 a tank rolls through Los Angeles behind a marching band. The American flag 16  
17 is waving throughout the red-hued scenes, while the only overt symbols in the 17  
18 vernacular shots are tribally inspired tattoos. A hint of dissent arrives at the end, 18  
19 when a protester in sad clown makeup holds up an out-of-shot sign. Then, several 19  
20 green-hued shots of Los Angeles appear. 20

21 The “Suck My Kiss” video echoes Lefebvre (1991); a (perhaps) materialist 21  
22 approach for a postmodern band. The state shots are “representations of space,” 22  
23 i.e. the dominant space of order, while the vernacular shots are “representational 23  
24 space,” i.e. “the loci of passion of action, of lived situations” (Lefebvre 1991, 24  
25 42). The video, however, departs from Marxism in that it is not an obvious attack 25  
26 on state order and hegemony, nor is it a pure celebration of artistic emotion and 26  
27 humanistic freedom. Instead, it plays the two narratives off one another. They are 27  
28 two inherently different social scenes, and yet both rooted in the same city. The 28  
29 streets of L.A. exist for a long-haired drummer to ride his motorcycle as well as 29  
30 a venue to pledge allegiance to the state. The place is a product of both (or more) 30  
31 spaces, and these spaces could not exist without such a place. In many ways the 31  
32 video expresses the conflicting use of the postwar American road. While designed 32  
33 for military purposes and constructed from the engineer’s pragmatic vision (Brown 33  
34 2005), it has been used in subversive ways as a means for subcultural (often male) 34  
35 escape (Cresswell 1993). 35

36 36  
37 37

38 **“Under the Bridge”** 38  
39 39

40 Arguably the band’s most recognized song, “Under the Bridge” (*Blood Sugar Sex* 40  
41 *Magik* 1991; video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHcGmhvDICY>) is not 41  
42 only set in Los Angeles, but uses the city as a driving character. The song deals 42  
43 with lead singer Anthony Kiedis’s addiction to heroin, and was “discovered” in 43  
44 his stack of poems by producer Rick Rubin (see the *Funky Monks* documentary). 44  
45 45



1	It is a dark song, opening with the emptiness and solitude Kiedis felt at the depth	1
2	of his addiction:	2
3		3
4	Sometimes I feel	4
5	Like I don't have a partner	5
6	Sometimes I feel	6
7	Like my only friend	7
8	Is the city I live in	8
9	The city of Angels	9
10	Lonely as I am	10
11	Together we cry	11
12	("Under the Bridge" <i>Blood Sugar Sex Magik</i> 1991)	12
13		13
14	The city is the only "person" in his life that understands who he truly is, who can	14
15	see through his demons to his true soul. "I walk through her hills/'cause she knows	15
16	who I am/She sees my good deeds/ and she kisses me windy ("Under the Bridge,"	16
17	<i>Blood Sugar Sex Magik</i> 1991)."	17
18	The video furthers the concept of the personified city. The downtown skyline is	18
19	played against the floating bodies of the band members, almost making it the fifth	19
20	'Chili Pepper. As Kiedis walks through downtown Los Angeles, weaving through	20
21	citizens and streets, he sings the lyrics to the camera, as if he is introducing the	21
22	viewer to his friend L.A. He interacts with local merchants to show a connection	22
23	with the bodies that make up the city. The fact that this is downtown, and not Santa	23
24	Monica or Pasadena, embraces the vernacular side of the band's tastes. Graffiti,	24
25	non-Anglo Angelinos, and modest architecture help to highlight both the despair	25
26	that runs throughout the city, as well as the urban "survivors" that occupy the city.	26
27	While pastiche is not a driving force of the song or video, it is a testament to the	27
28	role Los Angeles has played for the Red Hot Chili Peppers.	28
29		29
30		30
31	<b>"By the Way"</b>	31
32		32
33	The video for "By the Way" ( <i>By The Way</i> 2002; video at: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdagH15ZEwQ">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdagH15ZEwQ</a> ) is more obviously Los Angeles than the song	33
34	itself. It opens with a shot of an Echo Park Avenue street sign, <sup>4</sup> then tilts down	34
35	to Anthony Kiedis hailing a cab. This video is the most interesting of the band's	35
36	video catalog as it does not revolve around a musical performance, a collection of	36
37	images, or a fantastic premise. While the video content is centered on a fictional	37
38	event, the viewer follows a narrative of the band as one might actually see them	38
39	at home in Los Angeles. The video has a voyeuristic style, which gives it a more	39
40	"authentic" feel than the interactions seen in "Under the Bridge."	40
41		41
42		42
43	4 The Echo Park and Silverlake neighborhoods of Los Angeles are known for their	43
44	bohemian vibe as well as recent gentrification efforts.	44

1 An obsessed fan drives a cab that Kiedis hails. The driver slides a Red 1  
 2 Hot Chili Peppers CD (the “By the Way” single) into the stereo, which Kiedis 2  
 3 politely acknowledges. As the song’s intensity progresses, so too does the driver’s 3  
 4 excitement. The cab begins racing through L.A., the cabbie pounding on his 4  
 5 steering wheel along with the funk, and Kiedis grows uncomfortable. He pulls out 5  
 6 his phone to call for help, but the crazed driver slams on the brakes to knock it out 6  
 7 of his hands. The driver pulls into a deserted tunnel and stops the cab. While he 7  
 8 pulls out flares from the trunk, Kiedis takes out a PDA (personal digital assistant) 8  
 9 (two phones—how L.A. is that?). 9

10 Sitting at a sidewalk café somewhere in the city, Flea and John Frusciante 10  
 11 receive a text message from the now abducted Kiedis. Flea’s hair is electric blue: 11  
 12 a punk rock juxtaposition with the bourgeois setting. They laugh at the apparent 12  
 13 kidnapping joke, and go back to their drinks. Meanwhile, Kiedis is subjected to 13  
 14 the cabbie dancing in front of the cab with lit flares in hand, performing what can 14  
 15 best be described as a “white-trash island dance.” He sends another text and this 15  
 16 one is taken seriously. 16

17 The rescue vehicle is absurd; a yellowish-orange 1960s vintage Ford Bronco, 17  
 18 which is a perfect complement to the equally absurd rescue mission. Flea and 18  
 19 Frusciante chase the cab, which is once again driving recklessly through Los 19  
 20 Angeles. Kiedis breaks the rear window of his prison, climbs onto the roof of the 20  
 21 cab and leaps into the Bronco. The two vehicles part ways, and the final shot is of 21  
 22 the cab now picking up the unsuspecting ‘Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith. 22

23 Beneath the sudden narrative structure in the band’s work, there are significant 23  
 24 underlying images in the video. Once again, the streets of Los Angeles are used, but 24  
 25 unlike the L.A. of “Under the Bridge,” this setting is not bound to the vernacular. 25  
 26 The story begins in the gentrified Echo Park with Anthony Kiedis dressed in a 26  
 27 hip blazer. This is quite the departure from strolling though downtown in a ratty 27  
 28 T-shirt and long hair. While it might look like the band has forgotten its roots 28  
 29 with this journey into elite Los Angeles, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have actually 29  
 30 achieved a new level of pastiche. Refined Echo Park is matched with a wild car 30  
 31 chase. Respectable citizens meet deviant cab drivers. Trendy rockstars drink tea 31  
 32 at a sidewalk café then drive a monster truck. The video moves from clean streets 32  
 33 to forgotten tunnels revealing an underworld of trash and graffiti. And while this 33  
 34 dialectical Los Angeles is played with, the car chase event evokes Hollywood 34  
 35 action hero machismo. All the while, the music shifts from the haunting high range 35  
 36 of Keidis’s voice and steady, quiet drumming to the heavy bass and nonsensical 36  
 37 lyrics, then back again. The song seamlessly shifts from “pretty” to “rockin’.” 37  
 38 Whatever the influence, the content of this video is the sum of the city. The video 38  
 39 further produces a Red Hot Chili Peppers vision of Los Angeles. Flea’s blue hair 39  
 40 set against a luxurious café might look odd against the traditional milieus of 40  
 41 Chicago or New York, but it actually makes sense in L.A. Images like those in the 41  
 42 video construct the Los Angeles that allows and produces such juxtaposition. 42

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1	<b>“Tell Me Baby”</b>	1
2		2
3	The Red Hot Chili Peppers’ latest work, <i>Stadium Arcadium</i> , is an attempt not to	3
4	be confined to the boundaries of Earth, which is evident from the celestial theme	4
5	of the double album. The band may have tried to produce a universal album, but	5
6	it is still rooted in Los Angeles. “Tell Me Baby” ( <i>Stadium Arcadium</i> 2006; video	6
7	at: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsNcc2soDyY">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsNcc2soDyY</a> ) is a song about migrating	7
8	to Hollywood in the hope of making it big. It tells the story of every wannabe	8
9	rockstar, actress, and model that has ever moved to the city:	9
10		10
11	They come from every state to find	11
12	Some dreams were meant to be declined	12
13	Tell the man what did you have in mind	13
14	What have you come to do	14
15	(“Tell Me Baby,” <i>Stadium Arcadium</i> 2006)	15
16		16
17	The very subject of the song is a mixture of elites and commoners. After all, these	17
18	worldly rockstars were once those trying to make it big themselves. The video	18
19	further that concept, shot entirely in a small dingy room with a simple camcorder.	19
20	Various musicians and singers are brought in front of the camera as if they are	20
21	auditioning during the song’s intro. Flea appears on the tiny stage and launches	21
22	into the music when the song picks up. Shots of the Red Hot Chili Peppers playing	22
23	the song are mixed with the wannabes covering the same one. Some have potential,	23
24	others are “meant to be declined.” As the video progresses, the band sneaks onto	24
25	the stage with the auditioning musicians and begins playing with them. The elite	25
26	rockstars and the lowly wannabes switch physical and social roles; nobodies sing	26
27	with celebrities backing them up. The video culminates with everyone playing,	27
28	dancing, and singing in a frenzied jam session. The energy and excitement of the	28
29	wannabes merges with the sheer joy of the band to great effect.	29
30	Through the lyrics, the band acknowledges the palimpsest that is Los	30
31	Angeles:	31
32		32
33	This town is made of many things	33
34	Just look at what the current brings	34
35	So high it’s only promising	35
36	This place was made on you	36
37	(“Tell Me Baby,” <i>Stadium Arcadium</i> 2006)	37
38		38
39	By singing that L.A. is “made of many things,” the band brings together the	39
40	different worlds of Los Angeles that they have lived and encountered throughout	40
41	their career. It acknowledges the capitalist structures that draw artists from across	41
42	the world, as well as the rebellious nature of the artists themselves. Through “Tell	42
43	Me Baby” the listener/viewer learns that L.A. is hope, L.A. is despair, L.A. is	43
44	good, L.A. is bad.	44

1 The importance of this particular video is stressed in the 4 June 2006 “Fleamail,” 1  
 2 occasional open e-mails written by Flea to fans in a punctuation-free stream of 2  
 3 consciousness, evocative of Jack Kerouac: 3

4  
 5 we made a video for the song ‘tell me baby’ and we just saw it yesterday i am 5  
 6 so excited about it it is the best one we ever did, it was done by dayton and faris 6  
 7 they made us the best video of our career and i cant say what it is and ruin the 7  
 8 debut of it, not to sound so high and mighty like it is such an important thing 8  
 9 but, i think it is the most beautiful piece of film that has ever represented us 9  
 10 (Balzary 2006) 10

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12

### 13 Conclusion 13

14

15 In Mike Davis’s less-than-flattering critique of the city (1990), he touches upon the 15  
 16 fact that “Los Angeles is usually seen as peculiarly infertile cultural soil, unable 16  
 17 to produce, to this day, any homegrown intelligentsia” (17). For a Marxist scholar, 17  
 18 such an elite stance is surprising, as it seems to betray his apparent motives. He 18  
 19 attacks Los Angeles for not mimicking “old world” urban life *and* for not breaking 19  
 20 down the norms of class structure. At the end of his history of intellectual Los 20  
 21 Angeles, Davis mentions gangsta rap as a conduit for the marginalized voice of 21  
 22 the inner city, although he criticizes the West Coast’s rappers for “selling out.” 22  
 23 They are not making music as an art form, but are instead focused on making 23  
 24 money. No doubt this concerns a Marxist like Davis, yet he fails to remove his own 24  
 25 bias towards the capital structures that rule Los Angeles. How can anyone truly 25  
 26 criticize a person born into the poverty and violence of Compton who wants to 26  
 27 make money to escape it? By accepting the juxtaposition inherent in being true to 27  
 28 one’s art while making money, of fighting existing structures while utilizing them 28  
 29 to create music, the Red Hot Chili Peppers have been able to prove that rejecting a 29  
 30 meta-narrative in favor of accepting multiple narratives is possible. 30

31 Forman deftly discusses the territoriality of rap and its “strong local allegiances” 31  
 32 (2000, 88) while avoiding ivory tower judgment. Rappers explicitly talk of the 32  
 33 local through their lyrics, giving voice to the male aggression found in the ‘hoods. 33  
 34 The Red Hot Chili Peppers, not born and raised in the ghetto, but by no means elite 34  
 35 Angelinos, give voice to their locale. For the band, Los Angeles is a city of tension 35  
 36 and hypocrisy. The band members are of a world that acknowledges the anger of 36  
 37 Compton, while not discounting the opulence of the West side. 37

38 However, the Red Hot Chili Peppers depart from the localism of rap in that 38  
 39 they weave multiple local identities into their artwork, video images, and music. It 39  
 40 is rare to hear a straightforward critique of the city in the lyrics. It is through such 40  
 41 subtlety that the band is able to create pastiche, interpretive artistry, and to address 41  
 42 the totality of their city. Rather than limiting themselves to one neighborhood of 42  
 43 the sprawling city, or to themes of male aggression and poverty, or fashion and 43  
 44 leisure, that is, by rejecting ontology, they are actually able to produce a version of 44

45

1 L.A. that speaks to all classes and identities. Conversely, if we accept the idea of 1  
 2 Los Angeles as a postmodern city (Dear and Flusty 1998; Soja 1996b) not fitting 2  
 3 with classic models of urban life, it makes sense that L.A. would produce such a 3  
 4 postmodern band. The Red Hot Chili Peppers have made a career out of pastiche; 4  
 5 borrowing and blending elements of rap, rock n' roll, funk, punk, country, and jazz. 5  
 6 Songs from Hank Williams are skillfully reinterpreted with bass lines reminiscent 6  
 7 of Bootsy Collins ("Why don't you love me?" *Red Hot Chili Peppers* 1984). And 7  
 8 while it is doubtful that this music could be made in any other city (keeping in 8  
 9 mind that *One Hot Minute*, the band's most criticized post-*Blood Sugar Sex Magik* 9  
 10 album, was recorded in Hawaii), the Red Hot Chili Peppers' sonic choices and 10  
 11 images, like that of a blue-haired Flea sitting at a refined sidewalk café, have 11  
 12 helped to produce an untraditional image of L.A. 12

13 This chapter is by no means the endpoint of studying the music of the Red Hot 13  
 14 Chili Peppers. While preceding geographic work has focused on place, the spaces 14  
 15 of love, lust, despair, addiction, machismo, and maturity are ripe for geographic 15  
 16 analysis. Aitken and Craine (2002) have already begun to lay the foundation 16  
 17 of such work. An analysis of both the places and spaces of the Red Hot Chili 17  
 18 Peppers will be necessary to grasp the totality of the dialectical and postmodern 18  
 19 relationships between the band and L.A. geography. And while Los Angeles has 19  
 20 played an important role in the band's work, who knows what places and spaces 20  
 21 the band has yet to explore? 21

22  
 23 If you let go and let this music take you by the hand it will take you flying 23  
 24 through skies of sound. It will zoom you up well above outer space and it will 24  
 25 show you around planes of existence that do not share the laws and conditions 25  
 26 of this reality. And when it brings you down to earth it will dig deep into that 26  
 27 shit. It will also teach you to fall back without landing on your ass and to fall 27  
 28 forward without falling on your face. Let go and you can be two places at once, 28  
 29 you can be as big as the whole universe and as small as an atom simultaneously 29  
 30 ... In the words of one of the supreme gods of funk, "Nothing is good unless you 30  
 31 play with it." The Red Hot Chili Peppers ... have played with light, darkness, 31  
 32 sound, silence, form, air, and space to make music that plays with the listener 32  
 33 (Frusciante 2006). 33

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