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Hot reception

November 25 2002

Down in the village of Congo on the NSW south coast last week, Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers was relaxing in his beachside home, jamming with his young neighbours.

He met Rory and Dane Quirk in the surf off Congo almost 10 years ago and bought the teenage brothers their first guitars and amplifiers.

On Friday night in Sydney, the Quirks will appear as the support band for the Red Hot Chili Peppers at Aussie Stadium, in a gig only dreamed about by young musicians across the world. (They are also the support on the rest of the Chili Peppers' Australian tour).

It's hard for any kid in rural Australia - or suburban America, for that matter - to imagine one of the world's best-known musicians lobbing up to the house next door. But Flea's determination to introduce his teenage friends to the world of rock 'n' roll makes the story even sweeter.

"When I first met them, Dane was 14 and Rory was 12, or something like that," Flea said, speaking from his home in Congo last week.

"They were really nice kids, and I got them guitars and basses and amps, and just tried to encourage them.

"I got them the stuff, but they just really blossomed and nurtured their creativity, they're really talented kids. They really have something great to say. They made their record in my garage down here."

Flea was busy helping the Quirks steady their nerves last week, before they played their first stadium shows.

"I've been hanging out with them since I got down here, and they're a little nervous," Flea said, laughing. "But they'll be all right. I saw them play the other day; they'll be fine."

The inclusion of the Quirks on the Red Hot Chili Peppers tour says more about Flea's upbringing than anything else. The bass guitarist was born in Melbourne, but his family moved to New York when he was four. He and his sister were forced to take speech classes to rid them of their curious Aussie accents.

But the fledgling musician spent most of his youth in Los Angeles, where he turned to music at school, as salvation from drugs and crime.

"When I was a kid I was in the jazz band, the marching band, the orchestra, the choir, whatever I could be in," he said. "If it wasn't for that, I would have been a complete delinquent."

"Honestly, I was on the street, I was on drugs, I was robbing houses. I was up to no good, let's put it that way. Because I had music, it gave me something to do with my time, but it also gave me a place to feel sane. It was a really healthy thing, and I know there's a lot of kids like me."

Despite the tens of millions of record sales by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Flea hasn't forgotten how important music education was in shaping his destiny.

"[For most kids] it seems like some sort of magic trick that you can never pull off," he said. "But it is possible.

"I know it sounds corny and like some self-help cartoon or something, but because of that I opened up a music school in Los Angeles. It's called the Silverlake Conservatorium of Music and we've got 300 students there."

"It's just a good feeling to see kids doing stuff, and nurturing that part of themselves which is so important to me."

For millions of other young people, inspiration comes through the Chili Peppers' music. Rather than resting on their laurels over the last five years - after more than a decade of high-profile success - the band produced *Californication* (widely hailed as their best work) and have followed up with this year's release *By The Way*.

"The Chili Peppers demands a lot of time and energy," Flea said. "But I'm just really grateful to be doing what I'm doing. It demands a lot of focus and discipline all the time, and not letting up, and not letting things unravel. Maintaining the cohesiveness between all of us, to keep it flowing. It's hard work - we're certainly not sitting around sipping champagne."

Flea said arrogance was not the key factor in successful bands going off the rails. He believes the greatest danger is laziness. "After our last record, when we sold ten zillion, it would have been very easy to goof off and do whatever," he said. "But we chose to get into a room every day, and to write, and to compose this new record. To retain our focus and discipline every day. Believe me, it's not easy."

The Chili Peppers also thrive on live performances. For Flea, it's going to be extra special in Sydney this time around, because his young neighbours will be sharing the stage.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers perform at Aussie Stadium on Friday night. Bookings through Ticketek on 02 9266 4800.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/11/24/1037697981710.html>