

UNKLE

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The Men From

UNKLE

THE EMPIRE

Story:

Photography:

Visuals:

While the column inches mounted for UNKLE at the end of '98 and the face of supa-Ape, James Lavelle, peeped from the pages of every style and music magazine across the globe, the 25 year old svengali was orchestrating a new deal for his Mo' Wax label. After the collapse of A&M records, Mo' Wax found itself adrift within the Polygram empire and James was wisely orchestrating its relocation from a company about to be swallowed up by another multinational corporation, Seagrams.

Reputedly for a sum in excess of one million pounds Mo' Wax has joined forces with the UK's most powerful indie label XL. Negotiating his way out of Polygram was never going to be easy and their lawyers made him pay for deserting their albeit beleaguered ship. Lavelle got to keep the Mo' Wax name but all those Mo' Wax artists contracted to Polygram had to remain where they were, including the other half of UNKLE: beatz wiz and hip hop disciple DJ Shadow.

The Men From UNKLE. With its loosely affiliated band members, its magpie appropriation of styles and lack of respect for current rules, the UNKLE project proved, back in '98, that hip hop culture could shake the foundations of rock whilst still giving club land a run for their money.

Yet it was, with all its cameos and state of the art recording techniques, very much studio bound. A live show could well have been James Lavelle's final stumbling block. But undeterred, at the beginning of this year, Mo' Wax's head honcho recruited the skills

of UK champion turntablists Tony Vegas and Prime Cuts from the Scratch Perverts, drafted in state of the art projectionists, The Light Surgeons, and took UNKLE firstly to Japan and then on the NME tour. So did the holygoof finally meet his match or did UNKLE pull it off again? Chaser asks the DJ's, Prime Cuts and Tony Vegas, how it all went...

First up, Prime Cuts:

How did you hook up with UNKLE? I didn't know James personally, but Tony had worked with Mo' Wax

There's a touch of irony in the fact that those former Mo' Wax artists — DJ Shadow, Money Mark, Peshay and Kirk DeGiorgio — are now to appear on Blue, a new Island label A&R'd by another Chaser scribe and music lover, Ross Allen, but James seems undeterred. While he's busy courting the NME and maintaining his pop star status by appearing live on-stage as the musical director of UNKLE, he is, without doubt, behind the scenes actively building a new roster for Mo' Wax.

As the Shadlin master once said, "You have learned the lesson Grasshopper." In a previous life, James Lavelle was that Grasshopper and we at Chaser are curious to discover how — now there's a new home for the label — his musical vision will take shape and allow the Mo' Wax empire to strike back.

In the meantime, Alex Rayner, fresh from viewing UNKLE on tour in Sheffield takes up the UNKLE saga.

in the past. When the tour came up he approached us. We worked out how we could make the UNKLE album happen live and took him up on the offer.

How did you recreate Psyence Fiction live? We broke the whole thing down into parts, much like a band. I might have a bassline record or a drum loop record, Tony could have the vocal acapella and James could have some backing record. We'd splice the whole thing together on three sets of decks with James usually playing the backing track and laying



STRIKES BACK

SCRATCH PERVERTS

No monkey business

some effects over the top. We must have had 25 records pressed up of each part of each song in the live show.

Where did things really fuck up? In Liverpool the crowd ended up getting really fucked off. They were expecting the full UNKLE line up, which is unrealistic; they started heckling. One of the vocal acapellas began to jump and things went from bad to worse. The last show was cool though: Ian Brown sang his UNKLE part live; the crowd just went ballistic.

How does this tour differ from the Scratch Perverts imminent tour of the States with Om records? That will be a straight up hip hop tour, so I guess we can expect less moshing. Plus we can size ourselves up with the world competition.

Where do the Scratch Perverts rank in terms of world turntablism? I guess the Invisible Scratch Picklz are the best and then we're all a couple of rungs below that. With most crews there are a couple of real geniuses and then the rest are OK. Us, the Xecutioners, The Beat Junkies are all about equal.

Do you get pissed off with crowds just staring and not dancing when you DJ? It's great to have people appreciate your skills, but when you play clubs it would be nice to get the crowd dancing. Instead, they just form this semi-circle and stare. We call it 'the goldfish bowl effect'.

Next up, Tony Vegas:

What did you make of James Lavelle? James is blinding. He's a very honest person and a good businessman. I've known him for years. People tend to rip into him for no reason. They see him up there with a bit of an ego and tinted glasses on and they just take the piss. He's thick skinned, but it still gets to me. I think it's wrong.

How did the press take to the UNKLE show? Well, I've never given a fuck what the press think, but I guess a few questions needed answering at the first show, since some people were expecting Thom Yorke, Richard Ashcroft and Ian Brown to come onto stage holding hands with Mike D skipping round them. We proved them

wrong. We gave them a fucking good show. The light show was amazing, the kids absolutely loved it. That should count towards something, shouldn't it? The journalists who didn't take to the show either lacked the understanding of what a live show could encompass or were scared of what a live show could encompass. Traditionally live music is coming to an end, and if these journalists have no understanding of where things are heading next then they're gonna be writing for Angling Times in a couple of years time. Not that I have anything against fishing.

Where does turntablism stand these days? It's entering a mad period of transition. After all, what's the difference between someone performing 10 chords on a guitar — perhaps even using the same 10 chords that appear in the following songs — and me doing a ten beat juggle? Which one is more live? It's an argument that goes on forever, and not one that I'm that interested in pursuing. At last the barriers seem to be dropping, this is what the tour proved. This is the future and if you can't keep up then stay out of our way.

MELODY *maker*

NOVEMBER 14 1998

news

UNKLE – James Lavelle and The Scratch Perverts (aka Tony Vegas and Joel Clements) – play a full-scale UK tour throughout January. They'll be supported by Bratpoppers, Idlewild and Delakota.

Lavelle is taking one of the most talked-about albums of the year, "Psyence Fiction", and mixing "f***ed up versions" live at the following venues: Glasgow QMU (January 10), Liverpool Lomax 2 (11), Manchester University (12), Leeds Metro University (14), Sheffield University (15), Warwick University (16), Cardiff University (18), Bristol University (19), Oxford Brookes University (20), Leicester De Montfort University (22), Norwich UEA (23) and London



James Lavelle:
specs appeal

UNKLE: THE APPLIANCE OF 'PSYENCE'

Astoria (24). Tickets are £8 or £9 for the London show.

Other guest DJs are yet to be announced, but the UNKLE camp is promising a visual extravaganza by The Light Surgeons.

Meanwhile, UNKLE's label, Mo'Wax, has joined forces with the Beggars Banquet subsidiary, XL Recordings.

The Maker had already predicted that Lavelle, who co-owns the label with Steve Finan, would team up with a large independent label after the closure of A&M Records which

formerly licensed Mo'Wax.

The joint venture will leave Mo'Wax with complete creative control over all musical and visual areas, while benefiting from the Beggars/XL international networks which shot Prodigy's album, "Fat Of The Land", to Number One in 27 countries.

In a statement, Lavelle commented: "1998 was both a very exciting year for me, with the successes of both the UNKLE and the Money Mark albums, and also a traumatic one, with the closure of A&M

Records. Due to circumstances beyond our control, some very difficult decisions had to be made. Having considered all the options, two things occurred to me. One was that going independent is definitely the future for the area of music that I deal with. The second is that XL was the company I believed would represent us best."

The first releases under the new partnership are likely to be albums from San Franciscan hip hoppers Blackalicious and Jurassic 5 DJ Cut Chemist.

UNKLE Bomb

He can't DJ, he can't play anything and DJ Shadow isn't here, but Mo'Wax boss James Lavelle is still taking his UNKLE project out on the road.

In an act of Mandelsonian slipperiness, this Manchester University gig by the trip-hop supergroup is billed "UNKLE presents James Lavelle and The Scratch Perverts". That's because DJ Shadow, who wrote the bulk of the UNKLE album, *Psycence Fiction*, for Mo'Wax founder Lavelle, is not here. Also not here are Richard Ashcroft, Thom Yorke and Beastie Boy Mike D, the guest stars who helped turn Shadow and Lavelle's troubled project — "a billion years in the making" — into one of the most talked about releases of 1998.

At the very least, the Mo'Wax impresario could be accused of giving the Advertising Standards Authority cause for concern. But, in the same way that on record 24-year-old Lavelle acts like "the director of a film" rather than actually writing or playing the music,

he's selected award-winning DJ crew The Scratch Perverts to mix and scratch tonight's music on turntables on his behalf.

UNKLE take the stage to a Stephen Hawking-like announcement and some rolling Star Wars credits. Lavelle, in sunglasses and camouflage parka, is flanked by Perverts Tony Vegas and Prime Cuts, who work themselves into a blur for UNKLE Main Tide Theme. Lavelle, meanwhile, is trying hard to look busy, squinting at his records, glancing at his partners, and occasionally twiddling the odd knob.

They spin Richard Ashcroft's *Lonely Soul*, as overblown as a Harry Enfield Verve pastiche, and a well-received cut-up of *Be There* — a new version of Unreal with the disembodied vocals of one Ian Brown floating through the room. More impressive are the visuals,

cycling through Desert Storm graphics and Planet Of The Apes footage like a unholy fusion of MTV zapper-culture and Nintendo.

But "live", the short-comings of Lavelle's album seem starkly drawn. Six months since its release, the initial excitement surrounding *Psycence Fiction* has evaporated, leaving behind the album's essence: workaday instrumental hip hop tracks with random guest appearances.

"It's shite," grumbles a Mancunian audience member. "It's Shadow that does everything, and he isn't even here." Another, who later identifies himself simply as Pete, rushes up to a notepad-brandishing Q and insists, "It's crap. Write that down."

"We made this record using samplers and records," argues Lavelle, surveying a post-gig apocalypse of beer glasses and

fag butts backstage. "The record was made in a hip hop aesthetic. I didn't want to come on stage with a live band when it wasn't made with a live band."

Lavelle explains his role as playing beats and a cappella, working in samples and sounds from vinyl. "People see The Scratch Perverts in a very energetic sense, but they're playing over records I'm supplying them with."

As for the whereabouts of the mysterious DJ Shadow, the other talent behind the 150,000-selling UNKLE project? When pressed, Lavelle explains he's "trying to recover from

recording the album" and that "DJ Shadow needs to be DJ Shadow for a while".

Now, more than ever, this sounds like a very astute move.

Rob Fearn

The Scratch Perverts: Prime Cuts, James Lavelle, Tony Vegas



Lavelle is trying hard to look busy, squinting at his records, glancing at his partners, and occasionally twiddling the odd knob.

UNKLE/IDLEWILD/ DELAKOTA/ LLAMA FARMERS

(Clockwise from right) UNKLE, Llama Farmers, Idlewild and Delakota kick off the NME Premier Tour this week at Glasgow QMU (January 10), Liverpool L2 (11) and Manchester University, Union (12).



UNKLE, Delakota and Idlewild @ Sheffield University

Usually we don't review DJ sets on our live pages, because, well, it's not *live* music. DJs 'DJ' and bands play live. The only problem with UNKLE is that they do a bit of both.

What they certainly don't do is usher Richard Ashcroft from The Verve, Thom Yorke from Radiohead and Mike D from The Beastie Boys on stage to perform their various contributions to James Lavelle and DJ Shadow's magnum opus. Instead the Mo'Wax head honcho has drafted in the tricky Tony Vegas and Prime Cuts from UK turntablists The Scratch Perverts to help recreate the album live.

The rest of the bill are more traditional live acts. UNKLE, you see, draw one of those baggy trousered, beanie hatted crowds who are as likely to be into the Manics as Mickey Finn. Idlewild's flailing guitars and mop tops aren't much cop. However, Delakota — former indie kids turned fruit loop funkateers — are both amusing and danceable.

UNKLE, on the other hand, are much more bombastic. Taking to the stage with mock Star Wars credits rolling behind them, they launch immediately into *Lonely Soul*. You know in your heart that they're simply playing records, but it's hard to hold that thought, as you're carried away by the cross-fader domination, sound effects and flickering light trickery. *Rabbit In Your Headlights* sits in the set a little uneasily, before there's a sneak preview of UNKLE's latest composition, *Be There*, featuring banged up ex-Stone Roser Ian Brown. The kids like this one and they frug along in appreciation.

Soon songs are abandoned altogether, leaving The Pervs to flex their skills, winning ample applause from an eager audience. Perhaps this is the true way to represent dance acts — no more ropey dance troupes or bods crouched behind banks of keys. Just stick a couple of hot DJs up front, lay your hands on a wowing light show and, well, bob's yer UNKLE. Alex Rayner



Oi, I thought Shadow wasn't playing with them...

Reviews

This week's Premier Tour through records and live reviews

LIVE: 22-24
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**UNKLE/Idlewild/
Delakota/Llama
Farmers**

Liverpool L2

The man from UNKLE flings 12 inches of vinyl into the crowd and slopes off. His parting gift is pounced on by impeccably-trained young things, baying for more. The floor is



HAVIN' IT CAMOUFLAGE!
UNKLE'S TONY (LEFT) AND
JAMES APPLY THE 'PSYENCE'

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY WILKINSON

WHEN TWO TRIBES GO TO TOUR!

sticky, faces are flushed, and one thing is clear. There may be two distinct musical cultures sharing a venue tonight, but it's nice to see the international language of *fuck, yeah!* being understood by all.

If you look closely, there's a kind of subtle migration going on during the first night of the NME Premier Tour. Two populations are gently filtering past one another, depending on who's onstage. Teenagers in T-shirts shuffle forwards to investigate the **LLAMA FARMERS**. Cargo-trousered 20-somethings lounge patiently at the back, awaiting the sound of crossfaders, unaware that guitars are about to pin them to the wall. For if the Farmers' fusion of jaw-length haircuts and big riffs isn't exactly a brave modernist novelty, songs like 'Big Wheels', their current single and grown-up label debut, rumble with the kind of confidence that cuts off small talk. Despite their recent threats, the youth of Greenwich (their bass player still can't vote) don't actually blow Idlewild offstage. But there's a strong wind behind them.

Gradually, though, the frayed T-shirts of rock give way to groovier gear stageside, and **DELAKOTA** demand that we "get it own!". With the help of their bongo and gong, obviously. It takes all of ten seconds of 'Show Me The Door's' low-slung groove to



THE LLAMAS: FRINGE BENEFITS

induce a party onstage, and suddenly, we're no longer in the Northwest on a cold Tuesday night: we're in some balmy clime where the Mondays meet Stax for a sun-kissed cocktail.

From humble fragile beginnings, Delakota frontman Cass has turned into some weird cross between a tambourine-wielding sprite and a classic nasal-rock frontman; a man who wiggles his bum and looks cool doing it. So too, his band - all six of them - two-step on the line between sampladelia and classic shapes, between the sussed mash-up of 'C'Mon Cincinnati' and 'The Rock's'



SLACK MAGIC: IDLEWILD'S RODDY KICKSTARTS THE MOSHING

simple loveliness. A technical glitch and an uncalled-for sax solo apart, their moves are sure-footed.

And although Delakota sign off impishly with a glitterbomb, **IDLEWILD** are here to provide the emotional pyrotechnics. The tropical poolside dancefloor suddenly shape-shifts into a

writhing moshpit, Roddy Woomble chucks bits of his soul up into the microphone, and guitarist Rod now rivals bassist Bob in the Really Violent Guitar-playing stakes. There is little mystery to the Idlewild approach to making music, as critics will attest, but there remains utter fascination in



CINCINNATI KIDS: DELAKOTA

songs like 'I Am A Message'. People in expensive skate gear waiting for UNKLE are rapt, as though understanding, finally, that the euphoria of punk rock is the same thing as the rush of a breakbeat pile-up.

Which is exactly what happens, in reverse, when Idlewild fans linger on at the back and watch three blokes play some records. It's hard to account for the awe that's inspired tonight by grown men destroying vinyl copies of 'Psyence Fiction' in pursuit of widdly noises, but **UNKLE's** set - Mo'Wax boss James Lavelle mixing, Scratch Perverts Tony Vegas and Prime Cuts on two decks either side - is amazing. Richard Ashcroft's disembodied vocal floats in the air as a hailstorm of beats and DJ

Shadow mood-pieces descends, then is lost in a blizzard of speed-of-sound (or should that be the sound of speed?) scratching. A similar scenario unfolds with 'Rabbit In Your Headlights', and the as-yet unreleased Ian Brown track, 'Be There'. But instead of marking a soulless, postmodern experience (no instruments, no flesh and blood, just... technicians and the ghost in the machine) UNKLE's attempt to prove that turntables are just as exciting as, y'know, guitars, pays off in full. People are cheering for, *pogoing* to scratching. A boy in an Ian Brown (circa '89) shirt may actually be babbling. An understanding, of sorts, has been reached.
Kitty Empire

ROAD RAGE

Shots from the frontline of the *NME* Premier Tour

Photography: **Roger Sargent**

Arriving in Glasgow on the first night of the *NME* Premier Tour, we expect to find four bands displaying incipient symptoms of extreme pre-gig anxiety – you know, pissed to the gills, planning armed robberies, impaling one another with drumsticks. That sort of thing. UNKLE, Idlewild, Delakota and Llama Farmers are about to embark on a 12-date trawl, elbow to elbow, in an effort to capture the hearts of the nation's youth. Surely they must be half-crazed with anticipation and gallons of complimentary lager. Or maybe not...



As far as top-quality pogoing goes there can be no substitute – it's got to be Idlewild (above) every time

Idlewild (right) drinking themselves under the table... Geddit?!



"I can't see a bloody thing in these glasses. But at least they look cool... Doh!" James Lavelle (right) and Scratch Perverts' Prime Cuts on the joy of specs

UNKLE's visual technicians, The Light Surgeons (left), prepare to, er, light up.

"I really welcome this opportunity. Doing clubs would have been a lot easier, but this way we can preach to people who aren't necessarily converted. We hope that it challenges people's idea of what a band is," states a chuffed James Lavelle on the UNKLE experience.

Beware kids, the band may occasionally require a blood sacrifice...



This is the real story of what the road can do to a man (right). It is James Lavelle's 'mate' Rich on the UNKLE bus to Liverpool. Last night, he drank ten pints of lager, punched himself in the head, fell down a flight of stairs and trashed a hotel room. Finally, Lavelle had to beat him up. Today, he has bloody knuckles, a huge bump on his head, and his chest is caving in. He spends the entire journey guzzling a bottle of vodka, screaming and trying to lick people. Look and learn kids, this man is rock...

