

**“NOBODY WAS GOING TO GET PAID.  
NOBODY WAS GETTING ANY CASH.”**

**JAMES MURPHY:** Everyone shared this idea that New York should be better and that stars should exist here. Otherwise go move to Chicago.

**SIMON REYNOLDS:** Early on, I wrote about DFA, and the framing paragraph asked when was the last time there was a really cool, local label? There was a void in New York, and that’s what DFA tapped into.

**MARCUS LAMBKIN:** I guess it was weird that James and Tim hit it off the way they did. They hit it off musically in a way I didn’t understand, you know?

**SIMON REYNOLDS:** It did seem like a two-man operation. Odd couple. It was classic archetypes: the very low-key, diffident, intricately minded Brit and the voluble, charismatic, louder American. And he had a great spiel, James did.

**JAMES MURPHY:** I mostly work alone because I’m too difficult for a lot of collaboration. Like when you get into a deep religious discussion and you get into a conflict like “That’s not God and we can’t talk anymore.” The conflict for me is “I cannot play this music if it’s not exactly how I need it to be.” I can’t hurt people’s feelings. It hits this deep conflict where I fall asleep or I get a panic attack. Tim was a special case.

**TIM GOLDSWORTHY:** Right away with James, I could reference things and he’d instantly get it.

**JAMES MURPHY:** I soon realized we had an insane amount in common.

We were both huge Smiths fans. Now, in contemporary talk that's like, "Of course, who wouldn't be? What maniac would hate Led Zeppelin?!" But in 1999 it was not cool. There's no explaining that to people. We were both like, "We know that's not cool but that's our taste."

**DOMINIQUE KEEGAN:** Tim and James loved each other.

**TIM GOLDSWORTHY:** I liked how Americans have this kind of I'm-working-on-a-car vibe in the studio.

**JAMES MURPHY:** His first show was going to the Ramones with his brother and my first show was the Ramones. America had grunge and England had acid house. Everything was the same in our formative years. But I was the guy in shitty bands and he was the guy from Unkle. He was cool. I'd never met anybody cool before. I didn't understand. A magazine is calling the studio asking, "What's Tim doing?" It was quite exciting.

**BRIAN LONG:** That's who he was. He was the guy who'd been doing live sound with Six Finger Satellite and he had this studio and was working with a guy that used to work at Mo' Wax. That was James.

**JAMES MURPHY:** We developed a secret language. I was very excited to be like, "I'm communicating with somebody! I'm not carrying him! He knows something that I don't know! And I know stuff that he doesn't know!" We were talking about how we were going to take over the world.

**PHIL MOSSMAN:** So yeah, we were taking the Irish ecstasy, going out every night, working every night on the Holmes record, partying all the time. It went on for months. A lot of writing in the studio. We'd go out and we'd find Jon Spencer on the street, say to him, "Come down and sing a song."

**JON SPENCER:** I knew those guys, yeah. I asked Unkle to do a remix of the Blues Explosion song "Bellbottoms." In those years we were looking outside of rock and roll or indie. So I met Tim, and then he ended up in New York. I did a guest vocal for a David Holmes record they made in New York.

**PHIL MOSSMAN:** Holmes asked him to come and sing on this track we

had called “Bad Thing.” That was one of the most amazing recording sessions I’ve ever done.

**DAVID HOLMES:** I had this kind of crazy sort of, like, sermon, from the deep South. And the phrase was “We’ve got a bad thing going on.” Kind of ironic, actually: it was like staring me in the face from the first recording! We did have a bad thing going on! But I played Jon the sermon, and he went into the vocal booth and just fucking destroyed it.

**TIM GOLDSWORTHY:** By this point, it was turning more and more into a me-and-James kind of party, because I was starting to really love working with Jon Spencer and all these Americans. The dream is starting to come true. And David’s just kind of off doing his thing, so it’s starting to get a bit rough.

**JON SPENCER:** There was a whole drama between Tim and James Murphy, and David Holmes. I never understood what happened but it was bad. David does not speak highly of James now and Tim does not speak highly of James.

**DAVID HOLMES:** I went there with the best intentions to make a great record, and we all partied our asses off, and then things happened, life happened. When there’s a bunch of people living together, working together, getting out of their faces together, it’s going to end in tears.

**JONATHAN GALKIN:** There are some raw wounds there. Because David kicked James out of the studio.

**TYLER BRODIE:** At some point David decided that Tim and James were colluding against him.

**DAVID HOLMES:** I didn’t know James. I thought we were just going to rent the studio and Phil was going to be our engineer. Then James quickly became the engineer. I was making a very big jump from making a sample-based record to working with live musicians.

**JONATHAN GALKIN:** Maybe David was also threatened because James could play every instrument in the room and David could play no instruments in the room. David was the guy in the room that would say, “I want my song to sound like this,” and he would put a record on, and it would be, like, the opening drum break from a

Can song, or a reggae song, or something, and James was like, “I can do that.” That is straight-up, like, egos clashing.

**JAMES MURPHY:** He was like, “We are going to make a record like Can.” I was really offended by that. Can were people who worked at the Musée Arteam and the keyboard player won the best young conductor award in Europe and as his reward he traveled to New York and met the Dream Syndicate people and John Cale and it blew his mind and he went back and formed a band with the best free-jazz drummer in Europe and they played together eight hours a day in a house with no distractions. You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.

**PHIL MOSSMAN:** Like in any Holmes adventure, the chaos ensued. It was a collision of different management styles.

**JONATHAN GALKIN:** There is a fucking sitar that was bought for that session. That’s how out of control things were, who buys a sitar? What Britpop idiot buys a sitar?

**JAMES MURPHY:** I tried to calm down and try my best, but at the end I felt like it was bullshit. That record was kind of bullshit. Nobody else seemed to be freaked out by that but I was. But boy, was Holmes good at getting people to do things and knowing what people want to hear. That’s a real talent.

**DAVID HOLMES:** We were all friends once. I have nothing against any of them. It was just, when you’re partying more than you are working—and, I mean, I think I was drunk every night—of course that’s going to alter people’s minds and paranoia sets in. When there are narcotics in the mix, it just gets fueled. And people start to sort of do their math and come up with the fucking wrong sums, you know what I mean? It’s not anyone’s fault. It’s actually my fault. I should have said, “Okay, guys, this isn’t working. This isn’t going to work; if we’re going to go out every night taking drugs and getting hammered, and then smoking weed all day, nothing is going to happen.” I should have walked away.

**TYLER BRODIE:** I guess Tim and James were just agreeing more than David was.

**JAMES MURPHY:** At a certain point we didn’t get along with David

anymore. Then Tim and I had a common enemy, so we bonded even more. We were often left by ourselves working. Then we were both frozen out.

**TYLER BRODIE:** David was just saying, “I don’t want to work with James and Tim anymore.”

**JAMES MURPHY:** He pulled a couple of psychological moves on us. I was really hurt. I’m a sensitive person. I take things personally. He was very welcoming to me and then he was kind of a dick to me and I was like, “What the fuck did I do?”

**DAVID HOLMES:** I wanted to go home, but Phil talked me into staying. So I went to Tyler and I said, “Look . . . The situation is unfixable. We’re not getting along. It’s a shit atmosphere, it’s not working blah, blah, blah, but I would like to stay and finish the record.”

**TYLER BRODIE:** David came to me and was like, “I can’t work with them anymore but I still want to use your studio.” I had just paid for this massive studio and was hoping to keep it booked for a little bit, so I was fine with that. I assumed James would be back in the studio afterward. James didn’t take that very well.

**JAMES MURPHY:** I got mad. He wanted me out and I was like, “I’m not leaving! This is my studio.”

**TYLER BRODIE:** We went into the big live room, which is soundproof. I don’t know if he did that on purpose, but James yelled at me for a long time and told me he would have taken a bullet for me before but now, you know, he wouldn’t.

**JONATHAN GALKIN:** Yeah, I got yelled at too. And James still held a grudge for a decade. That didn’t heal.

**DAVID HOLMES:** Obviously that didn’t go down too well. I think it took James a while to get over the fact that we were working in his studio, and he was deeply upset to say the least. He did sort of try to discredit me.

**TYLER BRODIE:** I was just trying to pay the bills. Anyway, from that point on I just let James handle the recording studio.

**DOMINIQUE KEEGAN:** David booked a flight back to London.

**TIM GOLDSWORTHY:** I feel bad about how I treated David at the time. I

was so excited about New York and the new possibilities that I was kind of like, “Yeah, cool, yeah! See ya! Bye!” And I feel a bit shitty about that.

**DAVID HOLMES:** We spent seven months making something like four or five tracks. I came home and did the other half in like three weeks.

**TIM GOLDSWORTHY:** So David goes off and James and I are left without any gigs. I’m homeless, but because of the dot-com boom we could just go to our billionaire friends and say, “Could you give us a million pounds to start our own record label?” They’d say, “Do you have any music?” “Nope! But we’ll make some!” And that was that.

**JUAN MACLEAN:** “Death from Above” was originally James’s idea for a sound system. It started when he was touring with Six Finger Satellite, because James was always making everything so incredibly loud and bombastic.

**JAMES MURPHY:** It was my nickname for sound. We just kept it.

**PHIL MOSSMAN:** I left New York for six or seven months, and when I came back, that’s when I started taking James more seriously. It was a massive shock that James had this in him. After Holmes, James was like, “Fuck these guys. I’ll get over these insecurities. I’m making a record for myself. I’m going to sing. I’m going to play everything. I’m going to learn how to DJ. I’m going to start a label.” It was just this sudden, like, big bang, explosion. It just came out like a flood.

**JAMES MURPHY:** I didn’t have some insane learning curve; the learning curve was just that I learned in the dark. I was the guy on the mountain kung fu-ing.

**TIM GOLDSWORTHY:** We were DJs, we were music makers, and part of making music is playing make believe. It’s just in our nature that if what you want to hear is not there, we’re going to get our friends together and play. We were going to spread the gospel of dance music.

**JAMES MURPHY:** All I wanted was to do good enough work that it was important. I wanted to be important. I didn’t know what that meant, even. There’s something sad about “Oh, I’ll just do my

thing." It's like, fuck you. It just seems safe. I don't want it to just be "Are you humble? Okay, we like you." Would we ever have Lou Reed or David Bowie if that was the rule? How was it okay for a twentysomething Bryan Ferry to be outrageous and be like, "I'm a fucking god," in 1972, and for us to all say, "Of course! That's ordained! That's wonderful." But how dare anyone stick their neck out now? By the late nineties, that's the way things were. "I'll just do my thing." Fuck you. No.

**JUAN MACLEAN:** Fun and sex were two things that were very much frowned upon in the indie rock world. Dance music for us seemed to be this thing that we could have fun doing; we could DJ and have parties where you actually played music that you liked. It was exciting. Once again we were on our own in our own world, doing our own thing, giving a giant fuck-you to everyone else.

**JAMES MURPHY:** DFA was a terrible label. We were not making any money. Nobody was going to get paid. Nobody was getting any cash. We were a bunch of crazy people who were doing everything as a giant art project, which was what was fucking amazing about it.