

## “WE GOT AWAY WITH MURDER”

**ASIF AHMED:** It took Yeah Yeah Yeahs a year to sign. We almost signed with Warner but then we did a meeting with Seymour Stein and he fell asleep in the goddamn dinner meeting we had later that month! And then Karen said something, totally innocently, about him falling asleep in the dinner meeting and it got printed in *New York* magazine.

**MARC SPITZ:** I saw Seymour Stein asleep at a Hives show at the *Spin* party at South by Southwest one year. I thought, “This is the best live band in the world and he’s sawing wood?”

**ASIF AHMED:** Everyone knows about the sleeping thing, but you don’t talk about it!

**MARC SPITZ:** There were people watching him sleep instead of watching the band. But he put out the Smiths in America, so, you know, he gets a pass.

**ASIF AHMED:** Every label Yeah Yeah Yeahs met with told them to get rid of me, but none of the labels factored in that Karen would tell me this every five minutes.

**SUROOSH ALVI:** They had a fucking lunatic manager. It was one of these things where you’ve been a manager for a long time and all of a sudden you have a band that everyone wants. You can be cool about it or you can be a fucking lunatic, and he was basically telling all the label bosses to fuck off. It was bad. Craig at Atlantic really wanted Yeah Yeah Yeahs and their manager is throwing drinks in his face calling him a major-label corporate evil piece of shit.

**ASIF AHMED:** I was kind of a loose cannon. I was like Mel Gibson in *Lethal Weapon* but darker and less talented and handsome.

**KAREN O:** Our management has always been really protective, effective as a buffer. We've heard the horror stories but they just sound like horror stories. It's hard to relate to them because we've been pretty protected from that.

**ASIF AHMED:** The deal that we did was respectable. It wasn't millions of dollars. I wanted them to recoup, because I also knew that if they were going to get a million and a half or three million dollars, they'd stop working. No one would work. EMI offered them a million five after that fucking EP came out and I'm like, "They have nine songs! They're not worth it!" I remember being in Brighton, loading in the truck, when Brian's father called me and said, "What the fuck is going on? You're turning down a million five?!" I'm like, "I'm doing this for a reason! If I take a million five, the label is going to own the catalog for the rest of the band's lives."

**NICK ZINNER:** From the beginning we set it up so that we wouldn't have any interference from the record label world, managerial world, a lot of those things which a lot of bands have. They're constantly having people fuck with their sound or style or image or songs. But we kind of set it up from day one not to ever have to deal with that.

**ASIF AHMED:** They were adamant about staying on Touch and Go and Wichita, where they'd done their EPs. The band didn't even want a major-label logo on the fucking CD case.

**SUROOSH ALVI:** There was still an aversion to majors at that time.

**ASIF AHMED:** Every band cares about image. If you find one that says they don't, they're fucking lying. Some bands want that legacy to say, "We were good enough to be signed to a major." But Yeah Yeah Yeahs didn't care. The indie thing was important to them because of the lack of pressure. They knew they were good; Karen knew she was good, she just didn't want to say it. No one wanted to say it because that's when the kind of weird postmodernist, pre-Pitchfork era of "whatevs" kicked in. It's cooler to be, "Meh."

**KIM GORDON:** When Yeah Yeah Yeahs signed, Karen asked me about Interscope. At that point we were so over the major-label thing. We were like, "You can do it if you want, if that's what you want."

What do you want?" A lot of people who want major-label deals don't realize how much work is involved. They expect you to work a lot.

**NICK ZINNER:** I remember Karen saying we are serious people in an unserious band. I try to stand by that, to not get too precious about things, to not have every little decision be the end-all and be-all of your entire personality.

**ASIF AHMED:** The turning point was when then they get their first royalty statement back from Wichita: thirty-two dollars. I called them, and I was laughing so hard. They were like, "Why are you laughing?" I'm like, "It's for thirty-two dollars!!!" They started laughing, too. Karen was like, "Okay, we'll call you back." Maybe two hours later she called me. She wasn't laughing at this point. "All right. We're going to do the major."

**KAREN O:** When we signed the deal to Interscope I was just thinking, "Out of all the majors, we choose the one that has Marilyn Manson, Eminem, and Dr. Dre."

**ASIF AHMED:** They liked Interscope because Interscope was the most flexible. I didn't like Jimmy Iovine too much—I still don't like Jimmy Iovine too much—but I respected him.

**NICK ZINNER:** We went with Interscope because they were like, "We like what you're doing fine, we wouldn't want to touch a thing." We were like, "We want that in writing."

**ASIF AHMED:** Nick was really, really guarded for the first year; he didn't let me do anything. Understandably. He's got friends that were in the same boat as he, the fresh new band, and then got fucked.

**KAREN O:** I remember thinking they were a little bit more confrontational as a major label.

**NICK ZINNER:** At the very beginning we wanted to reach kids, teenagers. That is the time when music is the thing that you identify with and identifies you and shapes your soul and your future self.

**KAREN O:** The most basic thing that I wanted was to break out of the sort of indie bubble and be able to reach more people, instead of being stuck in the indie world. All that changed later—Adele's on an indie label, XL—but at the time, it was like, either you stay at

the indies and you never really break out or you make the leap and try to get the word out.

**NICK ZINNER:** It was about creative freedom, about being able to, at least at the time, work on other projects and have that not be a big deal.

**KAREN O:** We wanted to give back from what we took. I wanted to see if we could broaden our audience. I can't even remember how the money thing came into play. Our management kind of took the lead on that.

**NICK ZINNER:** We got away with murder.

**ROB SHEFFIELD:** Labor Day weekend 2002 there was an all-day festival under the Williamsburg Bridge, in the parking lot. It was a Todd P show. Yeah Yeah Yeahs headlined. The Liars played. The Rogers Sisters. It was an all-day thing, and it was the kind of thing where people were climbing on nearby buildings and jumping on cars to get a look. This is when people still complained about coming out to Brooklyn. It was exciting that this was happening and so many of my bands were playing at the same time. It was Labor Day so the trains weren't running that often, so anybody who was there walked there. I remember being really excited and hoping there would be some other fans there. Yeah Yeah Yeahs went on last and they were the best. I'd seen them before, but it was the best I had seen them at that point. They played "Our Time," and everyone is singing "Our Time," and it really did feel like our time. It was this parking lot full of people that the song was for.

**DAVE SITEK:** New York had literally blown up and Karen's singing, "It's the year to be hated." That was like that most potent statement ever and it came from a band playing punk songs for kids. You had all these other high, intellectual-minded people not addressing it at all. And we were just like, "Whoa, Karen distilled it to like its most essential element and made it a pop song, and who thought that was going to fucking happen?"

**ROB SHEFFIELD:** It would have seemed really weird to think that people were going to start caring about that song all over the world.