



The man from UNKLE:  
James Lavelle, Camden,  
North London, 2017.

PHOTOGRAPHS RACHAEL WRIGHT

# JAMES LAVELLE

➤ **James Lavelle was the boy wonder who, as the founder of the Mo' Wax label, launched DJ Shadow and invented trip-hop. But it was as the director of his great collaborative project UNKLE that he proved himself to be a visionary lightning rod, bringing Thom Yorke, Mike D and Richard Ashcroft together. By 2003, though, he was nearly bankrupt. And then the trouble really started. Dorian Lynskey hears his story.**

**I**n February 1998, James Lavelle celebrated his 24th birthday with a party at London's Met Bar in the company of Noel Gallagher, Richard Ashcroft, Ian Brown, Carl Craig, Alexander McQueen and an Everest of cocaine. It was, he says happily, "a fucking amazing night".

At that moment Lavelle was the boy

wonder of British music. He was the hipster geek whose Mo' Wax label, home to DJ Shadow and his own UNKLE project, was the impeccably cool junction box for an international network of musicians, DJs and designers. When he was negotiating a deal with A&M in 1995, his gutsy deal-breaker was a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

By 2003, however, his star had plunged. Mo' Wax was dead and Lavelle was in debt to the tune of £270,000. He had to sell the Basquiat. "It was beautiful," he says wistfully, "while I had it."

It's been a long, intense journey, hence the title of the powerful new UNKLE album, *The Road: Part 1*. Raiding the archives for Mo' Wax's 21st anniversary in 2013, curating the Meltdown festival in 2014, and participating in a new documentary, *Artist & Repertoire*, have all conspired to make Lavelle reassess his past and ask himself why he makes music.

"The last 13 years have been fucking tough financially," he says over cartoons of Korean food in his manager's office in Camden. "In one way I'm probably insane to keep doing what I do. Anybody rational would have stopped trying to do UNKLE years ago." He laughs oddly. "I've put myself through quite extreme situations, both financially and emotionally. But then I got used to that very young."

*The Road: Part 1* opens with actor Brian Cox saying: "Have you looked at yourself? And have you thought about the mistakes you've made, and the road you've walked?"

James Lavelle has.

