

# BREAK FOR THE BORDER

*Mixmag* does LA to Mexico with raucous indie-dance heroes **Simian Mobile Disco**. Road trip!

Words Craig Torrance Photos Andy Cotterill

**B**EHIND THE OUTDOOR stage the backdrop consists of multi-storey car parks – one of which is either half finished or half destroyed – a handful of huge cranes looming out of the darkness like skeletal Godzillas, and countless dazzling, gaudy signs for the many fried chicken and burger joints this part of LA has to offer. In front of the stage a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, a Little Red Riding Hood, skeletons, fairies, a monk, Sarah Palin and Cindy McCain all throw their fists into the sticky evening air as the rave bleeps and synths of Simian Mobile Disco's 'It's The Beat' scythe through the night. On stage are the two members of the band, James Ford and Jas Shaw, surrounded by their glowing silver machinery and drowned in fluorescent green and blue lighting, heads bobbing up and down in tandem with each other and the blistering beats. The 'Haunted Mansion' fancy dress rave in downtown LA is going off, and as with so many festivals, parties and gigs this year all over the world, Simian Mobile Disco are the reason why. "That was a bit weird," remarks James, deadpan, walking off stage with a last look at the freakshow of



Southern comfort:  
James, left, and Jas



revellers bouncing around like crickets in a jam jar.

Along with the likes of Souwax and Justice, also on tonight's bill, Simian Mobile Disco are one of the main protagonists of the stadium-sized electro that's taken dance music by storm. James Ford, 31, and James Shaw (better known as Jas), 32, dropped their debut album 'Attack Decay Sustain Release' in the summer of 2007. It was massive: a diverse selection of blistering tracks including the ear-bashing electro of 'Tits And Acid', the smashmouth, rave-synth-heavy 'It's The Beat' and surging electro-techno of 'Hustler', with its piranha-like "Go to tha record stoah" hook. All were massive club smashes in their own right. Since then they've released various mix CDs (including a *Mixmag* covermount and one for Fabric), toured live and DJed all over the world, programmed their own club night and even overseen a remix album of 'ADSR' called 'Sample And Hold'. They have also gathered some big-name fans. "The tour we did with them last winter was fantastic," says Ed Simmons of The Chemical Brothers. "Their live show was imaginative and had a rawness and energy that brought to mind our shows."

"The great thing about Simian is that it's not the only thing we do; it's not our bread and butter," says Jas. "We both do other things and that makes the

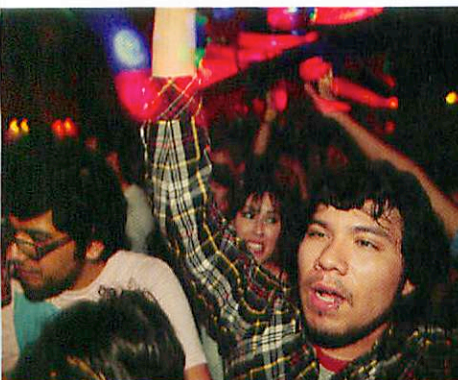
Simian stuff a little bit more special for us." Both talented musicians and producers, James, broad and with a mini-fro of dark, curly hair, has recently been simultaneously touring North America with SMD and playing drums for The Last Shadow Puppets, with Alex Turner and Miles Kane (of The Arctic Monkeys and The Rascals, respectively) and has been producing Klaxons' second album. Jas is slim and a little bit 'techno' with dirty blond hair and glasses. "I think I look a little bit like Richie Hawtin," he says. He does the majority of SMD's DJ gigs and has been putting in studio time writing with and producing with much-heralded electro-popster Little Boots.

It's lunch time the following day and SMD's US tour manager Karen has her foot on the gas pedal of our people carrier speeding out of Los Angeles, bound for Tijuana, just over the Mexican border. On board with Simian and *Mixmag* are the band's lighting guy Dave, and NYC promoter and DJ, Josh, who'll be supporting SMD on the decks later. Speeding along the freeway out of LA we're sandwiched between the Hollywood hills and countless car dealerships and retail parks.

We're travelling fairly light: SMD's live kit is now packed away and en route to South America – tonight the guys are only DJing. James sprawls on the front

seat, his feet splayed across the dashboard as he flicks between mariachi-esque music and spoken-word Christian radio stations. The talk soon turns to one of the many 'not of the norm' scenes on show at the LA rave the previous night. "Did you guys see those crazy kids, sitting around tripping off their heads while guys waved their hands in front of their faces?" barks James into the back of the people carrier. Suddenly Jas jumps out of his seat. "Pomona!" he shouts. "There's this legendary music shop there that sells all sorts of old studio gear. I really want to go there." Karen keeps the foot to the floor, the four-hour drive to the border clearly on her mind. "We can stop if we have time on the way back," she says, never taking her eyes off the road. Sadly for the guys, it never happens.

Both Jas and James are self-confessed music and studio geeks. Jas grew up in the "boring" town of Chelsfield, Kent. "There was no record shop there," he laughs. However he did spend a couple of years living in New Jersey with his family. "It was fucking bleak!" he says. "Kit from *Knight Rider* was from there, but sadly I never saw him." It was back in the UK, aged 11, that Jas's guitar-loving uncle bought him one. "It was an electric guitar with an amp and he showed me all the chords," says Jas. "But using amps moved me on. It

SMD rock  
The LobbySMD on tour:  
"Wednesday...  
it must be  
Mexico!"

became more and more about trying to make weird noises. Later on I'd hear weird noises when zapped off my face and then go back and try to recreate them."

James grew up in the sleepy surroundings of Leek, in the Peak District, near Stoke. He did his grades in flute and piano, encouraged by his parents, though it wasn't entirely to his liking. "I didn't like to practice flute or piano so I taught myself guitar," he says. "Even though there was nothing to do where I lived there were quite a lot of musical people, so I played in a lot of bands."

Back on the road and our trek down to San Diego and the border is split in two by a gas and food stop in the Californian city of San Juan Capistrano, made famous by its Spanish mission, though the small city's heritage is the last thing on our minds as we look to refuel on food. "I've had a burger every day since I've been in America – which is going on over a week," says James. But the general consensus is to sample some local delights at Pedro's Tacos. As the whole crew gorge on tacos and burritos, James pops into the store next door and acquires a T-shirt with a wolf's head on it. "It was only \$13!" he says, ecstatic.

James and Jas are fun to be around. They're clearly intelligent, great conversationalists and their humour bounces off each other and others in the group. The guys first met over 10 years ago when studying at Manchester University. James answered an advert from Jas and friend Alex MacNaughten. "I claimed I was a drummer and managed to get into the band," laughs James. Soon after, singer and songwriter Simon Lord joined, and the band Simian was born. While James and Jas were still excited by electronic music, the original Simian band was more indie-based and they had relative success in early 2000s, releasing two albums and touring all over the world. But the touring, and the four of them living together (now in London), got a bit much. "We had a big fight in a restaurant in Texas. Someone was strangling someone else on the street," says James. "We were like, 'that's it'. It wasn't worth it." James and Jas had been producing and DJing together under the Simian Mobile Disco guise on the side. "We were DJing together at afterparties during that time and were both into electronic music," says James. "We had also really enjoyed remixing [Simian's] 'Never Be Alone' as a B-side, and that was the start of SMD."

The breakthrough came in 2006 when French electro stable Kitsuné picked up 'Hustler'. A little-known Justice had previously remixed 'Never Be Alone' – retitled 'We Are Your Friends' in '06, the mix

## "Fame can be a bit uncomfortable. But I think people are into our stuff"

became an anthem of the electro genre. Although only tangentially connected with Simian Mobile Disco (all that Justice retained was the vocal), its massive success effectively helped launch two careers.

When we hit the US side of the border we are met by the friendly Mexican promoter Jesus, sporting a thick gaucho 'tache. We leave the people carrier in a giant car park and he walks us across the border into Tijuana, while our luggage is driven over separately. We breeze through a metal gate into the no-man's-land of the border, where, bizarrely, there are photographic artworks including one of several lines of a white substance and another of a strawberry strategically placed in large cleavage. Mexican police stand around chatting and laughing, arms folded, smoking and not paying much attention to us as SMD pose for pictures. They seem not to give a damn who crosses. A leisurely stroll through another metal gate and seconds later we're amidst the hubbub that is Tijuana, where every second store is a pharmacy selling Vicodin, Zanex, Viagra and Valium freely over the counter from oversized bottles. Sombreros and Lucha Libre masks are the other main merchandise, while commercial dance music pounds out of several of the bars nearby. The sun is now beating down, the air and noise pollution apparent in the thick air as engines buzz past, horns beeping. The locals converse in fast-paced Mexican as street vendors offer us ice lollies and beer.

Tijuana's Lobby Club is the venue for tonight's DJ set. It's housed in the reception of an old cinema, the roof of which was destroyed by fire. As we chill in the ruined cinema area, away from the madness inside, the promoter reappears with a stack of posters and a harem of girls. James and Jas take time out to sign the posters before countless photo sessions with avid fans. SMD are a big deal here. "The fame thing can be a bit uncomfortable sometimes,"

says James, "but I think most of the people are generally into our stuff, so it's quite flattering."

"James does a lot more on MySpace," adds Jas. "When people come up to you and chat, I definitely prefer that."

Soon the anticipation inside the venue turns into elation as Jas and James let fly on the decks with their combo of throbbing electro and pounding techno. The DJ booth is situated in the front and middle of the old lobby, flanked by staircases. The crowd, a mixture of pretty girls and jeans-'n'-T-shirt-wearing alpha males, brings a degree of raw energy and warmth to the place, completely getting what SMD are doing.

A week later, *Mixmag* touches base with Jas and James back in the UK on a cold, dark, decidedly un-Mexican evening at their studio in Hackney, East London. The studio is piled high with synths, the desks heaving with monitors and laptops. Both are glad to be back as they've just played two Creamfields gigs in Columbia and Argentina the weekend after the LA and Mexico adventures – between which Jas took the opportunity to fly home and see his newborn baby, whereas James stayed in the US for another Last Shadow Puppets gig in LA before moving on to San Francisco to DJ and produce a couple of tracks on Gossip's new album. "I'm glad to be coming to the end of touring this album," says James. "I still like the intuition of playing live, though." And what about DJing? "We do it back to back. It's like a game of chess."

The respite might not last too long. SMD's second album is about half done and due out in the summer of 2009, preceded by a club track called 'Synthesis' early in 2009 and then the first full single, as yet untitled and co-written with and featuring vocals from Beth Ditto of Gossip. The album will also feature a collaboration with Super Furry Animals and Neon Neon frontman Gruff Rhys. "We met them at festivals and suggested working with them," says Jas. "And, great for us, they were up for it."

Soon James and Jas are politely but hurriedly grabbing their bikes – a mountain bike for Jas, James on a smaller folder. They race off into the night, hoping to get home in time to do phone interviews with Australian journalists. Whether it's touring across the States, working with some of the top names in the music business or simply shifting it home from the studio on their bikes, Simian Mobile Disco's journey is far from over. ☉

Download Simian Mobile Disco tracks and remixes from the all new music store at [Mixmag.net](http://Mixmag.net)