

James Holden is an electronic musician and tinkerer who has worn many hats across his twenty year musical career: producer, remixer, DJ, record label boss, synth maestro, band leader, mix engineer, software developer and all round jack of all vaguely musical trades. Charting a haphazard course somewhere between unashamed dilettante and virtuosic polymath, Holden is an artist who seems to find it difficult to settle, no sooner finding himself momentarily aligned with one musical milieu (trance, progressive house, minimal techno, IDM, synth, jazz...) before his latest set of explorations lead him on to pastures new.

Holden was just nineteen years old and not quite finished university when he fell into a professional career in the more commercialised end of dance music, when an early 12" (*Horizons*) was picked up by a Sony Music-backed imprint in the trance glory days of 1999. A career as an international DJ and remixer to the stars (from Madonna and Britney to Radiohead, New Order and Depeche Mode) opened up before him, aided and abetted by his own proudly DIY Border Community imprint and a certain unstoppable remix of label protege Nathan Fake's *The Sky Was Pink*, a bonafide dance anthem which in various corners of electronic music came to define the sound of the mid-noughties. In 2006 he gently flexed his album muscles with the prescient *The Idiots Are Winning*, an EP of idiosyncratic dancefloor bangers and DJ tools which somehow swelled to album proportions and cemented Holden's status as a vibrant new force in electronic music.

But it was seven years later with the pagan thud of his epic landmark second album *The Inheritors* in 2013 that his path would take a bold left turn, prompting him to eventually hang up his DJ headphones and take a portable incarnation of his modular synth rig out on the road instead, accompanied by the live drums of Tom Page (Rocketnumberrnine, Neneh Cherry) and the occasional saxophone flourish from France's Etienne Jaumet (*Zombie Zombie*, *The Caterpillar's Intervention*). By the time of the recording sessions of his third artist album *The Animal Spirits* in 2016 Holden had grown his band to six, drafting in extra brass and percussion to assemble his own fantasy spiritual jazz ensemble (also to be known as The Animal Spirits) that would perform his new set of synth-led folk-trance standards, recorded all in one room in a series of live takes, no overdubs, no edits, under the direction of emergent band leader Holden. Further side project collaborations with Swiss accordion player Mario Batkovic, Polish clarinetist Waclaw Zimpel, Moroccan gnawa masters Maalem Houssam Guinia and his late father Maalem Mahmoud Guinia, and tabla player Camilo Tirado have continued to keep live collaborative performance firmly at the forefront of Holden's practice.

Fast forward to 2023, and although the studio-assembled audio collage of his new generically-unconstrained solo album of rave music for a parallel universe *Imagine This Is A High Dimensional Space Of All Possibilities* undoubtedly stands somewhat in contrast to the expanded band and live take dogma of its jazz adjacent predecessor, it also seems to represent a coming-to-terms with Holden's own musical past, with subtle nods and callbacks to notable moments in this twenty year long sonic history alongside the odd guest contribution from wider members of the Animal Spirits live family. The undulating dancefloor melancholy of *In The End You'll Know* and the spiralling kinetic pixie arpeggios and hazy vocals of *Trust Your Feet* and *Continuous Revolution* awaken the distant memory of his erstwhile DJ career, whilst the driving synth and drum, pagan thud, synthesized strings and woozy shimmering nostalgia of his landmark *Inheritors* era remains omnipresent (*Continuous Revolution*, *Worlds Collide* *Mountains Form*, *The Answer Is Yes*, *Infinite Fadeout*), albeit with a somewhat lighter and brighter sheen.

"For a while in the mid 2010s I couldn't hear dance music anymore, a single kick drum had me lunging for the skip button, but I've found my way back to that — reclaiming the bits I liked (the hypnotism, the utopianism, the wide ranging cross cultural freedom) and leaving behind what I don't need," he explains. "I wanted this to be my most open record, uncynical, naive, unguarded, the record teenage me wanted to make. It's like a dream of rave, a fantasy about a transformative music culture that would make the world better." And as if to prove he means business, after a ten year abstinence Holden has recently dipped his toe back into the remixing culture where he built his name, with XAM Duo (Sonic Cathedral), GoGo Penguin (Blue Note) and Lost Souls of Saturn (R&S) the latest blessed recipients of a Holden rework.

With a whole new raft of alternative rave anthems ready to unleash on the world, Holden (plus selected guest performers) are currently readying themselves to take his improvisation-ready bespoke live set-up back out on the road, which combines his own self-designed and 3D printed computer and modular synth case with a carefully chosen selection of synth modules and his own self-coded digital plug ins. Holden is a long-time advocate of Cycling74's Max/MSP programming language, and most recently he has used it to build an ambitious modular sequencing and synthesis environment to facilitate his live performances, which he also (in keeping with his collectivist impulses) plans to make available to other budding music makers via his website.

He lives in London with his partner (in life and business) Gemma, and their rescue Staffy Heidi.

Further reading:

- James Holden talks to John Doran for *The Quietus*:

<https://thequietus.com/articles/32610-james-holden-interview>