

## 30 SECONDS TO MARS

MAINSTREAM IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE ABILITY TO REACH A LOT OF PEOPLE



### Come Into The Pantheon

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Amidst the chaos and frenzy of decision making, phone calls, more decisions, picking colors, taglines, sleepless nights and hair pulling disagreements, one thing was unequivocally certain; we wanted 30 Seconds to Mars to be CONFRONT Magazine's first cover. As reckless as it was, we never considered other possibilities. It was 30 Seconds to Mars or no one. This amazing band's talent, originality and unconventional modus operandi, completely sets them apart from the current trend of factory produced look-a-likes. Also, their approach to the New Media, their interactive outreach and their obvious interest in an informed and self-determined public-at-large, is unlike anything we'd ever seen. And let's not forget that their music kicks some serious ass.

We already knew the basics. Namely that 30 Seconds to Mars was created in 1998 by Jared Leto (vocals, guitar) and his brother Shannon (drums). Later, Tomo Milicevic (guitar) and Matt Wachter (bass) joined the band and what began as a small family art project, now merges the worlds of audio and visual arts into something that transcends pre-conceived notions and breaks tradition.

Two critically acclaimed albums later, a sold out North American tour under their belts and a single off their sophomore release "A Beautiful Lie" now nominated for an MTV (and MTV2) video music awards, 30 Seconds to Mars has firmly established itself as an ascending force on the rock music playing field.

Given the bands incredibly busy schedule, it was impossible to sit with all four band members at one time. The interviews had to be spread out over the course of a few days. "You mean I have to go on a road trip AND see 30 Seconds to Mars more than once?" I must have dislocated a shoulder, I twisted my own arm so enthusiastically.

Our first "sit down" took place at a hotel in downtown Toronto. Myself and Christine, CONFRONT's arts and visuals director who was subbing as photographer, were escorted into an adjacent bistro-bar and asked to wait a few minutes for Matt and Tomo, who were on their way down. As we were getting organized - figuring out who should sit where, making sure that the voice recorder and the camera were both on, taking a moment to fix our hair (what? We are "girls" after all?) - Shannon walked in through a side door and made a b-line straight for us.

"Don't I know you?" he asked me. For some reason, that caught me off guard. The obvious answer should have been "yes! We saw each other at Edgefest two days ago" but I think my reply went more something like: "No, yes, sure, un huh!" For some reason, that made him laugh - was it the stammering like an idiot or the fact that my face was so red I could feel heat emanating from it?

By the time Matt and a still half asleep Tomo joined us, Shannon was headed to the venue and I had thankfully managed to regain my composure. Following quick introductions, the ordering of a late lunch and some casual banter, during which Matt and Tomo exchanged playful polemics to determine who got to tell who what to do and at what time - Tomo concluding that it was "an almost natural predicament" - we got down to business.



At the time of the interview, although the video had not yet been nominated for a VMA, MTV2 was already playing "The Kill" in heavy rotation, featuring the single in its elite 8; Something that is now connecting the band to a whole new demographic.



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"Nothing feels very different. We just continue to do what we've always been doing. This is just a natural progression I guess. We made a video here in Toronto which turned out to be really good and it's starting to go over in a lot of other formats." Tomo said about the band's transition.

When I asked him if this new acceptance was a sign that the video or the single itself was somehow more mainstream than what the band had previously released, he added "No, I think it's just all of our hard work on tour over the past years. It's finally starting to pay off and starting to reach more people.

Because of that, people like MTV are starting to come on board and work with us, whereas before they didn't want to for whatever reason. And when you have a video on MTV, a lot of people are gonna see it. So inevitably there's more people that buy your CD, more people come to shows."

It's important to note that although 30 Seconds to Mars has made the transition from "underground" to "pop", this is more indicative of the progression of mainstream, than it is a reflection of 30 Seconds to Mars' sound. Although different in many ways, "A beautiful lie" is as equally rock based as is its self-titled predecessor.

To broach the subject of mainstream is always touchy. There are some very negative connotations associated with the word. For many it implies sugary sweet bubble gum pop, the latest R&B sound alike or aging contemporary classics.

But there are bands out there who are working at erasing those pre-conceived notions. For me, 30 Seconds to Mars is one of those bands. Out of curiosity, I asked Matt and Tomo who they felt was doing a good job of breaching the divide.

Matt pondered the question a little before answering. "I think a band like Radiohead. Even though they been around for a very long time, they're mainstream but yet they have maintained their underground integrity. [...] I think most people are familiar with Radiohead, either the name or a song, but yet you don't really hear them on the radio that much. But they are still in the mainstream consciousness."



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Tomo pretty much hit the nail on the head when he concluded: "Ultimately those guys write great songs. And that's really what mainstream is all about. It's writing a song that can touch the most people."

In any case, 30 Seconds to Mars is really making its place in the mainstream market; but this is a fairly new development. The second album has been out for over a year but as Matt pointed out "For a lot of people this is still a new band. And people are just finding out about it."

Tomo explained why. "It's funny because since The Kill has been doing so well, everyone is kind of treating us like a new record, as if this was the first single. Because "Attack" did really well and got to # 20 and it was great but this is now, the sales and the people at the shows and MTV and the radio plays, is at such a higher level now, that to such a larger number of people we are like a brand new band so the momentum just hasn't gone down. It's just exponentially grown. So because of that, we really don't consider it's a year old record."

As the conversation progressed from the album, to individual likes and dislikes, I noticed a kind of confluence between these two that was very interesting. It was obvious that besides being coworkers, there was a camaraderie that surpassed the sharing of a stage. They countered each other well. Tomo seems very impulsive and vocal; Matt tends to deliberate more before answering a question. Tomo is very expressive and enthusiastic whereas Matt is deliberate and more demure. It's ironic that their instruments would reflect these traits. When I asked why they had chosen the instruments they did, I did so assuming that the guitar and bass were the only instruments they had ever seriously played. I soon found out I was wrong.

As was often the case during the interview, Tomo was the first to answer. "I didn't [start off by playing the guitar]. I started playing the violin when I was 3 years old. My dad always had a guitar lying around but I always thought it was a stupid instrument 'cause it had frets. And I thought 'what kind of a moron needs frets to play it in tune', you know. That's what I used to say to myself; because the violin is one of the most difficult instruments to learn. It takes years and years and years just to play a C major scale in tune. And I always scoffed at it. But then I discovered how it could be used. I started to learn about rock music and I discovered Nirvana and Metallica and that was it. Once I heard the power that you can create with it, I was no longer interested in the violin."



In his exuberance, Tomo even started to answer for Matt, telling me that he had started off playing the guitar and even some drums. Matt clarified by saying "I started out playing piano. My mom made us. I have three brothers. We all were forced to take piano lessons. Then they stopped but I continued. And then I started playing drums. Then I played guitar and the bass. I switched around a lot. And I think that kind of helped shape me as musician over all. I don't really know it was just kind of gradual. It was a progression."

Soon lunch was over and Matt and Tomo had to head over to the venue. As a parting question I asked Matt, if since his starting to play bass was a gradual progression, would he eventually want to progress onto something else. "Yeah; I'll just go back to something else. I'll eventually 'want' to play something else." He answered very stoically. But thankfully for 30 Seconds to Mars fans he added "But I'll always go back to it."

Our interview with Shannon took place in Cohoes, NY. We got to the venue just as the band was starting its sound check, giving us the opportunity to enjoy a short preview of that night's attraction. Even in sound check these guys sound amazing. Eventually Christine and I were taken into a small room and Shannon followed shortly after. He said hi, I said hi, he leaned in for hug and I leaned in the same direction, so we did a little dance, I got all embarrassed and he was laughing at me..... again.



If I had to pick one thing to say about Shannon, it would be that he's very aware; aware of his surroundings, aware of himself and aware of the impact of his words. We could be in deep conversation and just by the click of Christine's camera, he would know where she was and would position himself so she could get a better shot. He knows the effect he can have on people and uses it well. A smile, a wink, a hug, a sweet but mocking laugh... it's all deliberate. It's also very impressive.

I started our conversation by telling him how struck I was by the connection that has developed between the band and the Mars Army, 30 Seconds To Mars' fan base. These guys share more of themselves with their fans, than any other group I know of.

"Well, creating music is something of a shared experience. It's not a selfish thing. We aren't about just locking ourselves into a room and vibing out just with each other. We want to be able to experience and be able to express ourselves to a wide range of people and to continue to share that experience. It's an important thing. 30 Seconds to Mars isn't just four guys playing music, it is a family; it is a joint venture for everyone."

This 'sharing' he was talking about implied a certain level of familiarity; something that many celebrities find uncomfortable. The debate of how much personal information is too much is ages old; but Shannon seems to know where to draw the line.

"Well I mean, it's important to... Well for me as an artist, it's important to reveal a certain aspect of myself. There is a certain level of reward, that for lack of a better word, I get when I'm honest and selfless and I'm open-minded to ideas; and there's a certain level where you know, I don't have to tell them when my bowel movements are..."

And thank God for that. Because there's just certain information I and hopefully most other people, don't need. Shannon's a pretty happy and funny guy. Gross, but funny.

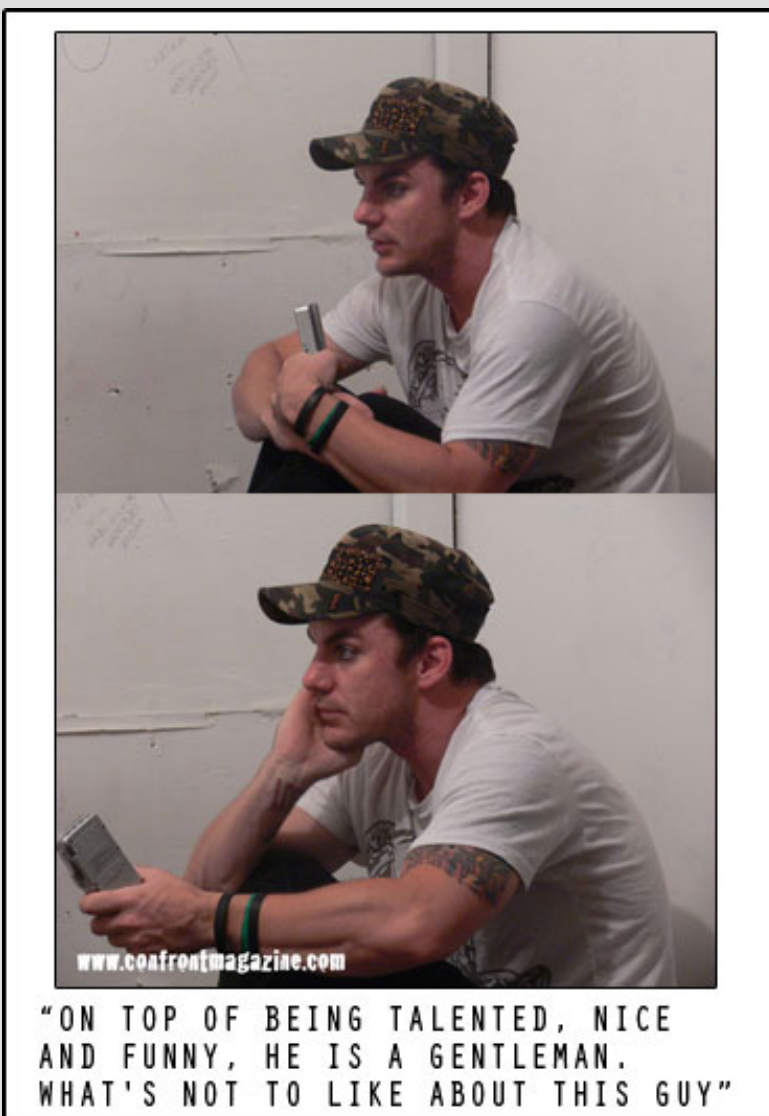
While doing research for these interviews, I found out that Shannon had done the photography for the booklet of the self-titled album. "Arts in general are a great way to express my feelings and my emotions that conversation lacks. I feel the most comfortable in my skin when I am expressing myself through those fields."



This artistic affinity is something that is extremely apparent in the way that the band presents itself and in Shannon's own views of what 30 Seconds to Mars is all about. "We lived really poor. Didn't have a TV. All we had was paper and canvasses and old cameras and albums to listen to, so it only makes sense that I would like bands like Pink Floyd that express themselves through the arts. I like bands like Kiss who were so extreme with their make-up and they did a whole production; whether you like them or not they were amazing at what they did as far as theatrics. I love bands like the Cure. I love all those bands that express themselves artistically, so that's what we do. So when I look at it, it totally makes sense that we are doing what we're doing now with the music."

As we were talking, I mentioned a television interview I had seen, where Moon Zappa was saying having been extremely jealous that she had to share her celebrity father with fans and the media. So I asked him how his family was dealing with the fact that he was so open and giving of himself with his fans. "They support it. They support it 100%. They back us. They know us, they know what we do. My mom is Mother Echelon. She is awesome and a huge supporter."

Having been on tour for so many months, something that keeps him away from his family for long stretches at a time seems like something that would be very difficult; but this doesn't seem to phase him. In fact he seems to rather enjoy it. "Yeah, the tour bus is my home. Hotels are my home. Airplanes are my home. I love this. This is something I'm compelled to do. I don't see myself quitting anytime soon or going anywhere else anytime soon. Or taking a break. It's a full time job. We all love it. Matt, Tomo, Jared, we all love performing and sharing the experience with others is an awesome thing."



As if being an incredible drummer and a good photographer wasn't enough, Shannon recently discovered a new talent. He is currently in the process of co-writing a screenplay with a friend of his. I commented that it was interesting that he would discover this talent only recently. "I think it's cool in a way because it's like this whole other world revealed itself to me and it surprises me actually. It's an amazing thing. It's something that I can do. One other thing that I can do which is great, you know; express myself through writing and characters and different scenes and stuff."

As we were talking, one of the opening acts started their sound check just outside the room where the interview was being held. I was in the middle of asking another question and didn't realize that the noise might be interfering with the recorder; but Shannon who as I said before, seems aware of everything going on, picked it up and held it toward me like a microphone. Embarrassed, I told him that I should be the one to do that but he just smiled, never handing it over. So on top of being talented, nice and funny, he is a gentleman. What's not to like about this guy.

In an effort to detract from my abashment, I asked Shannon how he dealt with the outside negativity that sometimes comes with being a celebrity. "I think it's highly important to think outside the box. I think it's important to open up your mind. I think it's really important to experience life and whatever it has to offer you and I think it's important to grow, to evolve. I definitely believe that there are many types of things that can be experienced in this world and why not experience them. Why not learn. And that is what 30 Seconds to Mars is about. It's about opening up your mind and listening to that internal voice that is shut down through the media and through the press and critics and just all those negative people out there you know what I mean?"

Given his views on the need for an open mind, I wanted to ask him how he felt about the current world of mainstream music. As a true believer of his own mantras he told me: "There are different celebrations in life, it's important to celebrate the successes, it's important to celebrate the ridiculous, it's important to celebrate the failures of man. It's important to celebrate basically all emotions and feelings that this life has. That's why there are different types of music out there and that's why there are different types of people in different types of worlds."

The problem with having a conversation with Shannon is that you lose track of time. He's so passionate about his opinions and shares them so openly that you can't help but get wrapped up in what he is saying. I hadn't realized that we had far surpassed the time allotted us. When he left, Shannon leaned in for another hug. I made sure this time to wait and see in what direction he was going. But again, that just made him laugh. I have to stop doing that.

Our road trip now over and 30 Seconds to Mars' schedule being what it is, our interview with Jared was scheduled to take place a few weeks after our return. Given that our offices are in Montreal Canada and the band was on its way to Denver Colorado, it had to be done over the phone. No big deal really. Especially given that the interview was scheduled to be on my birthday. So, along with friends and family, I got a call from Jared Leto. Happy Birthday to me!

In an interview I had read a long time ago, it was stated that when Jared had something to say, he wanted to make sure you understood it.

I can't tell you how true I found that to be. In the few minutes of pleasantries we exchanged at the beginning of the call, Jared was very casual and laid back; sounding almost sleepy as though he had just woken up from a nap.

But the minute I started to ask questions he snapped to attention, spoke louder and with a calculated pace. Despite trying to mirror his self-assurance and decisiveness (something that failed miserably), I found myself a little overwhelmed.

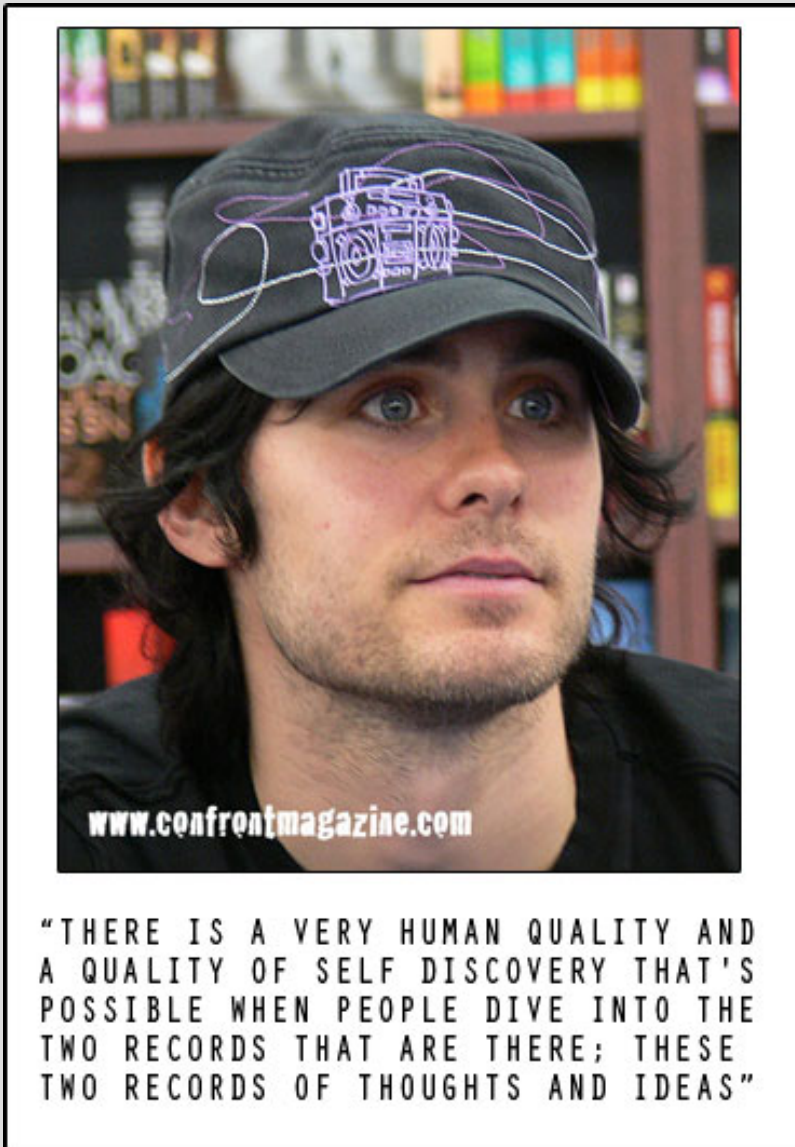


It's no secret that Jared and the band in general are very opinionated about current state of affairs. Recently, they have even included suggested readings (Siddhartha, by Herman Hesse) and movies (An Inconvenient Truth - now in theaters) in the newsletter that is circulated to their fan base. It came to mind that especially with the younger more impressionable ones, this was potentially forming minds.

"I don't think that that's necessarily a bad thing." He said to me when I brought it up. "I mean 30 Seconds to Mars' emphasis on creativity and belief in a world of non believers... you know, these are central themes and ideas. And I think that's very clear in the music and the artwork. And I think those ideas are not for everyone and are for the people who understand and they certainly aren't anything but positive ideas. I believe that in a world of negativity and a world of challenges that we all live in - this modern world - any community with a sense of positivity and inspiration and creativity is a good thing."

With the band's insistence that people should interpret the lyrics, the music and the artwork for themselves and their reluctance to share their own exegesis, I tentatively asked if he thought of his lyrics as having a positive outlook.

"Yeah I definitely do. I think that this album A Beautiful Lie is a conceptual album written from the point of view of someone who is at a crossroads in life and has to undergo really intense challenges and confrontations in order to move forward as a human being. And I know for a fact that a lot of people have identified with that because they come up and we talk about it. They say so and they share their life stories with us like we've shared with them and I have shared as a writer of lyrics and writer of songs. It's a reciprocal process and in a way you get it back somehow. But there is a very human quality and a quality of self discovery that's possible when people dive into the two records that are there; these two records of thoughts and ideas. You know, there is a kind of journey that you can take if you want to and it's something that people have responded to."



I wondered if the views of those coming to him to share how his lyrics have affected them had somehow altered his own meaning of the songs. "That's definitely part of the life of a song. It should alter it. It changes. It's not a constant thing. It's a thing that's open to manipulation. I think that that's an important process of artwork. It's the viewer, the listener, the person who brings their own experiences and that collides with everything else that is going on."

As I said earlier, although both rock, A Beautiful Lie and the Self-Titled album are very different; musically and lyrically. "Well I think that the new record is more succinct, and different. I didn't want to do the same thing twice. And I'm not gonna do the same thing twice next time either. It's important I think for an artist to move forward or else you'd move backward. And I wanted an album that was emotionally explosive and that connected."

When I added that it felt like the second album was more personal (more honest maybe?) he added "I think both albums are incredibly personal. It's just your perspective I suppose. The new album is one that uses minimalism and the first album is the opposite. It's about exuberance and a completely different approach. So yeah I think you're right."

One of the things I love about 30 Seconds to Mars, is the way they meld lyrics and music. It bears noting that Jared wrote all the lyrics and music on the self-titled album and did so again on most tracks of the second album. As a fan of music but an incompetent when it comes to writing and composing it, I was curious to learn about the process.

"Songs are written in a lot of different ways." He said to me when I asked why he chose the instruments he did. "I really just use the instruments to suit my needs as arrogant as that sounds I guess. But it's really... they are just tools. I look at the guitar and bass and drums and all that stuff, they are just like hammer and nails, you know. Basically they're just there to put the pieces together."

This surprised me. I had never really thought about it that way. I hadn't really seen a guitar, drums and bass as being the musical equivalent of a painter's oils and brushes. What was it then, that drew him to this artistic outlet?

"Well it's your mind and your gut and your heart and your imagination that are your real devices. The other things are just... I mean it doesn't matter how much you know about anything. Some people can work for years and not be able to produce something that they are proud of or that they feel is what they want to say. And other people... you know a child can sing a song and make you cry. It's a strange thing. And a mystical thing and magical thing and I think it's one of the reasons we celebrate it once it touches us."

He even views his voice, which happens to be one of the best voices in rock music, as just another tool. "Yeah. I mean it's [his voice] a similar thing. It's a means that justifies the ends. To tell the story, I think that the imagination, the heart, the gut, the soul are all much more important. These [instruments\voice] are just physical devices that are there to deliver thoughts and ideas that come from another place. Certainly when I'm writing most of the time it's ideas I've been working inside myself and I don't pick up instruments for a long time until I've been working the song for a while" He later added "I think that the best approach is to get the mind out of the way if possible; unless that's the tool you are using at that time to achieve a certain goal. If the approach is cerebral then that's another avenue to explore. But I think that harnessing the creative emotion is like catching a flare off the sun."

It's undeniable that Jared Leto has a way with words. A Beautiful Lie and the Self-Titled album are masterpieces both lyrically and musically. All four members bring something to the table that makes 30 Seconds to Mars just that much better than a lot of what's out there right now. It of course helps that they are all genuinely nice and open to the idea of sharing their thoughts with you. In fact, they encourage it. Their success is a prime example of what one can accomplish when taking the time to do something well and with heart.

If I wasn't already a fan, my time with Matt, Tomo, Shannon and Jared, has made one of me. I look forward to a new tour which should hopefully start this fall and I strongly suggest that you take the time to check these guys out. You won't regret it. I certainly haven't.

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