



by KIM MACK

With the unpleasantness of last year's \$30 million Virgin Records lawsuit safely behind them, 30 Seconds to Mars, featuring lead singer, guitarist and songwriter Jared Leto; drummer Shannon Leto; and guitarist Tomo Milicevic, are embracing the present and excited about the prospect of building on their previous successes. The Los Angeles-based trio have always shared a special bond with their fans. That closeness was borne out during the making of their latest record, *This Is War*, the follow-up to their multiplatinum sophomore effort *A Beautiful Lie*. The band invited fans to not only lend their voices to numerous songs on *This Is War*, but to also lend their faces to 2,000 different CD covers. *This Is War* is currently in release.

Music Connection: Where did you record *This Is War*? And how long did it take to finish?

Jared Leto: We recorded the majority of it in Los Angeles in a studio that was carved into the side of a house in the Hollywood Hills, and over the course of two years we worked on this record.

MC: Was the process smooth? Were there any unexpected obstacles?

Leto: The creative part of it was very smooth and really great. There were a lot of other elements that were challenging. Obviously we had the battle with our record label. The creative process always has its challenges. Some days are free flowing and easy, and other days are more about the work and searching for answers and finding solutions to creative problems.

MC: Did you find the songwriting process different in any way for *This Is War* in contrast with your other records?

Leto: Well, I think this record is a little less obtuse, a little more direct. The material was abundant this time around, and I tend to write a lot of songs when I work on a record. I wrote over a hundred songs for this album. I found that part to be really exciting and a lot of fun. So maybe it was because we had so many other distractions while we were making this record that the creative ones weren't as dear.

MC: Wow. That's quite a lot of songs. How did you ultimately cull through them to complete the album?

Leto: Survival of the fittest. [laughs] It really is a question of what works the best, what tells the story the best, what adds dynamic range to the experience. What you're most inspired and excited by. I guess making a record isn't really how well you can make a record forever, it's how well you can make *this* record within a given amount of time. I tend to work on something forever if I can. But at a certain point you end up making different choices rather than better ones.

MC: In that survival of the fittest process, is it you and the producers who are ultimately responsible? How does that work?

Leto: Ultimately it will come down to the band. Me and the band. But certainly, you work with [producers] Flood and Steve Lillywhite because you want their opinion and you respect their opinion. I was always interested to hear what they thought about certain songs and what was worth pursuing. I counted on Flood to help with the weeding out process for sure.

MC: You've alluded to your Virgin Records lawsuit. How do you think you managed to filter that out and stay focused on this album?

Leto: Pure survival. It wasn't just a press quote: "30 Million Dollar Lawsuit." It was very real. So you have to compartmentalize things. You have to focus on what's in front of you. You have to pay attention to the creative goals and not let the business deteriorate that process.



L-R: Tomo Milicević, Jared Leto and Shannon Leto
COPRA SWAKE

MC: How did your collaboration with Steve Lillywhite and Flood come about? What made you choose them as co-producers?

Leto: It happened because I've been a fan of Flood since I was a kid. I've been listening to his work and I was curious about him and was really excited about the possibility of working with him. We reached out and he came to see us at a show we played in Earls Court in the U.K., and we talked after the show and hit it off. We had a lot in common. I've always been a fan of his work, so he seemed like the perfect person to help us walk down this path that we were excited and ready to walk down: the path of transformation.

MC: And by "transformation" you mean transforming your sound?

Leto: Our sound, our intention and what we are about as a band, a group of musicians, artists collaborating together, and me as a songwriter. All of it. We were ready to move forward. The last record that came out in 2005 [*A Beautiful Lie*] has songs on it that I wrote in 2003, so as you can imagine that's quite a life you live from 2003 to 2009. A lot has changed in the world and with ourselves personally, and we have a different perspective now than we had then. It was time to say something new, different.

MC: What about Steve Lillywhite? How did that association come about?

Leto: Well, Steve came and helped us finish. We had kept Flood so long I think he started to forget what his kids look like. So, there was a great

period of time when we were working on the record ourselves. There were a couple of breaks we had with Flood where he had gone home. So I think Flood was there for about seven months out of the first year, and then the last month or so Steve Lillywhite came in and provided some perspective and some enthusiasm and helped us finish. He was just a great person to work with.

MC: They say he's known as a finisher.

Leto: He's the cleaner, yes.

MC: The process needed a cleaner?

Leto: In a sense, yeah. It was just great to have somebody that you respect so much and that you trust and are a lot of fun to be around. Flood and Steve have become friends and they are just wonderful people to be able to work with.

MC: *This Is War* has a really big sound. And obviously Lillywhite is known for creating that with some of his artists. Is that something you planned?

Leto: It just happens. I think it's a result of creative imagination and a desire to envelop the listener and to celebrate and to push the song to a place of its fullest potential. People have talked about this record in the same way you just did—very big sounding, sounding epic—but there are also very, very minimal moments, very small moments, moments that aren't crafted, moments that embrace mistakes, and we celebrated and focused on those as well.

MC: It sounds like you're a bit of a perfectionist. Is it difficult for you to let a song go, or to embrace the mistakes?

Leto: It can be difficult. It's interesting too, because with our live shows we look for that. I demand it of ourselves that we embrace the imperfections, the mistakes, the accidents because those are often some of the most exciting moments. But again, when you're in a studio and you have the opportunity to perfect things, I certainly can take advantage of that. There's a time and a place for it, and there's another time and a place to let the mistakes be celebrated. I think we have a good combination of both on *This Is War*. There are some songs that are recorded live with just a few mics, and other songs that are completely sculpted and crafted and electronic and use vintage synthesizers and are more of a world that is created, rather than captured.

MC: Are there any songs that you wish you could keep working on?

Leto: [Laughs] Probably. There are a few songs people encouraged me to stop working on, like "Stranger in a Strange Land." It's just very minimal in the beginning. I wanted to work on that song a little bit more, but Steve encouraged me to just let it be. I tend to work the songs until they die, and if they come back to life I know that they're good enough to be on the record.

MC: Do you have any favorite tracks?

Leto: I really love "Night of the Hunter," because I think it's a good example of some of the goals that we had for this album. You have the really simple and live verse that's basically an accident with the drum, microphone, and a live guitar, an acoustic guitar. Then they are up against this really bombastic, grandiose, huge chorus and straddling those two worlds is what I intended from the beginning. I talked to Flood about it a lot, the minute next to the massive.

MC: During the recording of this album you got your fans involved a lot. Can you talk a little bit about The Summit you had at the Avalon in Los Angeles earlier this year? What was it, and where did the idea come from?

Leto: The Summit was an idea that really was born out of the desire to do something utilizing new technology to create an interactive experience for this record. It went so well we ended up doing it in eight different countries around the world, nine including America. When you hear the song "Kings and Queens," our first single, on the radio, it's actually tens of thousands of people all around the world singing on that song and this idea just kept growing. Eventually I got a text message from someone in Iran who was disappointed they couldn't make one of the Summits, global Summits, so that gave me the idea to do a digital version of a Summit. I've always found it interesting to work in this place creatively. The interactive experience is a great place to foster connectivity and creative ideas, so it was a defining element I think, the defining element of this record.

MC: Could any fan do this?

Leto: Yeah. A thousand people showed up at the first one in L.A. And then we did them around the world: London, Germany, Milan, Paris, Mexico, Australia, and on and on. Eventually there was a digital version too. People could sit at home by themselves or with friends and contribute to the process.

MC: Were you concerned at any point that your experiment might not work?

Leto: Yeah, because I had worked on thinking about it for about a year and a half before we actually did it and it was kind of like mapping out an orchestra where strings would play or a certain horn section. There was a lot riding on it, but thankfully it worked wonderfully and it was a lot of fun.

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MC: How did The Faces of Mars marketing campaign, with the 2,000 different album covers featuring different fan pictures, come about?

Leto: I'm interested in where the online meets the off- and how to bridge those two worlds. I find the opportunities that are created by technology, the fact that it can foster connectivity and community rather than alienate, to be really fertile, creative ground to work in. That was the first part. The other part was finding a creative solution to the notion that buying a CD is less than exciting. We all know we're in the death of one system of delivery [of music] and the birth of another. It was a way to celebrate the release of the CD, to say "thank you" to some of the people who have been supporting us through these years in such a passionate way, and to do something different. I'm not a big fan of doing things in a standard way. I don't like to *just* do anything. You know, especially if you put quotes around the word "just," it just doesn't seem like that's enough. As a listener, as an audience member, I don't want that. I want more. And we've always had very active participation from our family of fans around the world. This just seemed like a really fun and interesting thing to do that hadn't been done before.

MC: Has it worked to your expectations?

Leto: Yesterday was the first night we sold CDs and signed them after the show. We ended up selling out of every single CD. We had a box of 600 CDs and we sold them all. But to see all the faces. People were coming through the line getting their CDs signed, and we all kept flipping over the CDs and looking to see the different faces on the booklets. It was worth all the hard work, because it was incredibly difficult to pull this off.

MC: Fans must have sent lots of photos. How did you ultimately pick? What was the criteria?

Leto: It was whoever submitted within a given period of time. And we had to do all this legal stuff, because, you know, the record company was very concerned about someone suing us if we put them on the cover of a record and didn't have their DNA or something on file [laughs]. I give the label credit for going for it and supporting the idea and helping to make it happen. But they were very concerned, as maybe they should be as a corporation, to have all the legal stuff worked out.

MC: Is there any sort of release strategy for these covers? Will different covers be released in different countries and at different times?

Leto: No, it's all worldwide. No one will ever know where their cover is. There will be a website created where people can actually go and share and trade, and there is already a Faces of Mars Twitter account set up.

MC: Has 30 Seconds to Mars always had a philosophy of fan inclusion? And did this fit in with your philosophy of music?

Leto: Well, it fits in with my philosophy of art. I grew up around a lot of artists in art communities. To me, this is a shared experience, a thriving, active, communal experience. It's not just about three guys in a band and a record company. It's about everybody that is participating in this. It's a very intimate thing to share your music in this way with people around the world, and I think they feel the same. They know how much they mean to us.

MC: How did your collaboration with Kanye West on "Hurricane" come about?

Leto: Kanye asked me to direct a video for him, but it didn't work out. He heard the song and loved it and ended up singing on it. (Ed.: Please see "Quick Facts" Sidebar for details.)

MC: What was it like working with him?

Leto: It was great. He's really passionate about what he does. He's incredibly creative and collaborative and nice and easy. I had a great time with him. We really hit it off and it's pretty amazing what he actually did on the song. I asked him to sing on the song, as opposed to rap. I don't believe he's ever sung on anyone else's song before. He's done some rapping on remixes for other rock bands, but he sang on this track and it sounds really great.

MC: Why singing versus rapping?

Leto: I had just been listening to his 808's & Heartbreak, and he was doing a lot of singing on that album. I just enjoyed his choices in melody.

MC: Do you have plans to collaborate with any more artists in the future?

Leto: I did have a lot of fun doing it, and I do look forward to doing more of it in the future. I don't think I've told anybody this, but Chino [Moreno] from the Deftones came and sang on a song as well. But we never had time to finish it, so I'm looking forward to finishing that with him.

MC: Is there a wish list of artists you'd like to work with in the future?

Leto: There are so many people I'd love to work with: Bjork, Thom Yorke, Richard James, Robert Smith, Trent Reznor.

MC: What are your tour plans?

Leto: We have announced an arena tour in Europe, and that is almost sold out, and we're going to be announcing a tour in the middle of March that will start in America.

MC: Despite all your success, do you have any dreams still unfulfilled?

Leto: Oh yeah. The great thing about being an artist is that no matter how much you succeed, you always feel like a failure [laughs]. And I say that half-joking. I'm terminally dissatisfied, so I've got plenty left to do.

Contact Cara Wodnicki, cara@pressherepublicity.com

QUICK FACTS

about

30 Seconds To MARS

- 30 Seconds to Mars boast over 100 million views on YouTube and 40 million plays on MySpace.

- The title track from *This Is War* is featured in the EA video game *Dragon Age: Origins*.

- Jared Leto recently told MTV.com that, due to record label legal issues, *This Is War's* "Hurricane" was released without Kanye West's vocals.

- Skateboarder Bam Margera, photographer Terry Richardson and personal manager Irving Azoff are among the 2,000 Faces of Mars.

- 30 Seconds to Mars invoked the [Olivia] De Havilland Law in order to resolve their lawsuit with Virgin Records. The law states that no service contract can be longer than seven years unless the employee wishes to extend the contract.

MC