Thomas Mars on being committed to your art



May 30, 2017 - Thomas Mars has been making music with his bandmates in Phoenix since they were kids. After self-releasing their own single in 1997, the band gradually built up an international following thanks in no small part to their own determination. “When we started, our ambitions were so high,” recalls Mars. “We were such brats.” Here Mars talks about the band's creative process and muses on the benefits of being almost fanatically committed to your own creative work. This year the band will release their sixth studio album, *Ti Amo*.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2223 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Production.

People might not realize how long Phoenix has been a band. You’ve been doing this since you were a kid.

Yeah, since I was 10. We were really about 10 years old when we started doing things. Apart from bartending, music is the only thing I know how to do. I destroyed every single other option that would lead me to any potential career other than music. I made it a point right from the start. If anything was a distraction, even if it was only a small outside interest, I would shut it down. I was a little more extreme than the other guys in the band in that way.

I went to college for four days. When I tell that to my friends here in the States, it seems like a big statement because here you have to pay for your education. In France, it’s not like that. You choose a subject that you want to study and then you to the nearest college that offers it; you don’t really have a choice. I picked a field of study that was only offered in Paris just so I could move there and the four of us could continue to stay together. The subjects I was studying involved math and economy. They had absolutely no appeal to me. After four days, I realized it was no good for me and since nobody was paying for my education, I didn’t feel any responsibility to stay. The other guys stayed and did the whole thing.

In the early years of being in a band—before anyone else really cares—what sustains you? What made you keep going?

Just the pleasure of the four of us playing music together. There was really no place for us to play live, so we focused on production and recording ourselves. That was tangible. We had an 8-track recorder and that was exciting to experiment with. In the beginning that kept us going. Eventually you become addicted to rehearsing and playing live, even when there’s no audience. There’s this appeal, that’s so strong, of hearing your own music being played loudly. That amplified kick. The sound itself. Just to hear anything amplified is a feeling that’s so strong.

That was enough for us. It didn’t matter that there was no audience. We’d have friends come over, but even then they didn’t really care about our music. They just wanted to hang out. We just always thought, “We’re doing this for the four of us.” There was nobody else.

Do you find that the same kind of spirit is still what motivates the band now?

It still feels very much the same. We learned along the way how to protect ourselves, and with every step along the way, with every recording, we’ve learned something. When we made our first record we spent all this time in our home studio making all of these songs. Then we get a record deal and the record company says, “You have two weeks in this really fancy studio. Go record everything again,” and you quickly realize that’s not how you want to do things. You are in this place with gold records on the wall, with all this history, and every minute you think, “For what we are spending on this hour of studio time, I could have bought a new guitar.” We carried that with us; we made sure along the way that we never wanted to waste our time or money that way again.

For this new record, we worked in a place that was basically just a big conference room—absolutely the opposite of a fancy studio. It looked like a giant pile of cables. We set up a system where we could record everything. All the computers, everything, is talking to each other, and we recorded everything, 24/7 to a MiDi file. If there was something that we liked that we made on May 1st 2016, we would make note of it. “May 1st, we liked something at 4:22PM.” Later we could go back to the audio and hear whatever we were doing at 4:22PM and listen to that take and work on it. It was, in some ways, incredibly time-consuming, but knowing that everything was always being recorded you stopped thinking about that part and just focused on playing, exploring.

The level of being control freaks was ridiculous, but it’s how we made it. The creative bond is all about the chemistry between the four of us in the room and less about any one person’s individual talents. That felt very true for us as a band. It’s not about any one person, it’s about all of us. It’s about how we sound together.

Every band is different, of course, but in most bands there seems to be one person who does the bulk of the writing. Phoenix sounds like a true democracy.

When we’re on tour, we never write songs. When we write songs in the studio, we arrive at the studio with nothing because everything we write is the result of unconscious chemistry, just the four us. We don’t come with pre-existing ideas, because we’re interested in what happens when we step into that creative space together with all of this stored-up energy. It’s collective work. We show up and then it’s like turning on a faucet. You’re waiting to see what pours out. That’s how our dynamic works.

Not to throw flowers at ourselves, but I feel like nobody really understands how the four of us work, how ridiculously intimate it is. It’s almost like a couple dynamic, where you know someone so well that eventually even language disappears.

So you all get in a room together to make songs. There are no preconceived ideas, no plan, you all just get together to make music. How do you start? Everyone just picks up an instrument and starts playing?

It’s a funny contradiction because when we started playing instruments as kids, the thing we didn’t want to do was jam. We wanted to have an idea. We wanted structure. Jamming was like this way of sharing the spotlight, where everyone got their own solo, every individual got their own moment to shine. When we were growing up, that’s how we thought of it. Eventually we embraced this more freeform approach. I wouldn’t call it jamming, but maybe it’s more about exploring.

In my favorite bands, it was never about one person’s specific talent, but an overall sound. Sometimes the sound is created by all the flaws and weird dynamics. So when we go into the studio, we do kind of jam, but it’s a collective thing. All of the electronics and the instruments are tied up together; they’re linked. None of them really have the stability to shine on their own. Everything bleeds together in a way that you can’t really tell what’s doing what. Someone who walks

into the room can't tell right away, "Oh, that sound is coming from that guy." It's not about individual virtuosity, but this larger stereo sound—the sound of all of us.

At a time when a lot of creators feel compelled to be making reactionary political art in response to what is going on in the world, your new music feels like a reaction against that. It feels like a reminder to embrace beauty.

We thought about that. What does it mean to make this kind of music right now? But it would have felt unnatural to alter the music in a way that didn't feel right. As long as the spectrum stays as wide as possible, then art is fulfilling its function. As long as you see something that you've never seen before, it's working. The more important thing is that you're making something genuine. When I see a movie, I want to see something and feel something that I've never seen or felt before and that can often be something quite simple. My interest is when I see something and I think, "Oh, that's a new perspective to me. I've never heard anyone tell that story like that before." You just want to tell the story in a unique and original way, even if the tools you are using are super familiar.

Do you find that your definition of what it means for something to be successful has changed over the years?

When we started, our ambitions were so high. We were such brats. I was convinced at a young age that every single thing that we were going to do in our lives would be documented in the same way the Beatles are documented. When we recorded in my parent's basement, I thought like "Wow, years from now people will look back on this session and talk about what an important event it was."

When we made our first record we thought the first day the record was out that everything was going to change. But nothing changed. I don't know anyone who put out a record and instantly had their life change. Maybe it changed eventually, but not right away. Not that day. But having that realization was a healthy start for us because we had to change what we should expect from the world. We expect a lot from each other, and I think we feel a lot of confidence in what we make—we wouldn't finish a record or release it if we weren't confident that it was good—but the satisfaction we get from it doesn't come from how other people react to it. We don't expect every record to be a huge hit. It doesn't really need to reach the masses to be satisfying. We realize that we only really needed to please ourselves. But still… when we started, the idea of being successful was just a given. Of course people are going to love us!

So maybe a little bit of delusional self-confidence can be a good thing?

That kind of bratty confidence can be a powerful force. It can carry you a long way, even when no one else cares. Maybe you need to believe that what you are doing is the greatest thing ever. If you don't believe it, why should anyone else?

I rewatched Close Encounters of the Third Kind after my wife told me one of her teachers in college saw it as a perfect metaphor of what it is to be an artist. Richard Dreyfuss needs to make the mountain, he needs more earth, he needs more material, and he's running around the neighborhood stealing everyone's plants and everyone is looking at him like he's crazy. His family is in jeopardy, his home is in jeopardy, but he is committed to chasing this vision that he's having. In the end, it's comforting to see him bonding with all of these other people people who are also having the same vision. It's soothing to know that you're not crazy, you're a part of this community of people who feel the same way you do. The movie just has so much heart. In the end he has to leave and go into space, but he's doing it for a bigger purpose.

There's a quote I love from Ed Ruscha: "Good art should elicit the response of "Huh?" and then "Wow!" As opposed to "Wow!" And then "Huh?" Whenever I feel an instant "Wow!" I always question when the "Huh?" is going to come. I always think this is a good tool to use when I'm trying to digest something new.

A book that I always come back to, especially on tour, is Please Kill Me (by Gillian McCain and Legs McNeil) I'm surprised that I can read it so often. Also, when I'm bored, I'll just watch an Iggy Pop interview on YouTube. He's always my go-to. He's always a comfort. Now there are all these books and documentaries about him and you can see that he's just responsible for so much.

There are a lot of Italian influences on our new record, so I would definitely suggest Lucio Battisti. He is an Italian songwriter and composer who was very famous in the '70s. If possible you should read a translation of his lyrics. There's always a very clever and simple idea behind every song. There's one song that I really love called "Il Salame" which is a song about food. Not an easy thing to pull off. The song is about a weird kid who is maybe around 12 years old and has just experienced his first real feeling of sexual tension with a girl. They are kids so nothing really happens, but after having this rush of new feelings he is so shaken by it that his first reaction is something like, "Let's go get something to eat." He opens the fridge and sees the salami. Somehow the song manages to be incredibly beautiful and not corny at all.

Prince. "Paisley Park" was the first song I heard of his after he passed and somehow it made me feel an even stronger connection to him. I love that he basically created his own fantasy world in his music, which is kind of the dream when you are an artist.

Name
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Vocation
Musician

Fact

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Photo: Hedi Slimane