

“What the hell was that?” 30 Seconds To Mars in Bilbao



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So, recently I was in Bilbao, Spain covering a music festival there called Bilbao BBK Live for Clash. Chances are you will see a review of the whole event at some point in some form...but I want to focus on one particular band that managed to make me not just angry but quite sad. Of all the artists that could have gotten big in the world and popular enough to perform headliner-type sets at festivals it just didn't seem possible to fathom how or why this particular outfit got that far.

That group - notice how I don't use the word 'artist', which would be overestimating them - is 30 Seconds To Mars.

I understand for some people that this may not come as a surprise revelation nor an interesting and innovative argument; you might think: "So they're rubbish. So what?" I should therefore stress that this isn't a case of trolling, this isn't going to be an overlong and petulant rant and this isn't just writing up something about 30 Seconds To Mars for the sake of it. I was merely so appalled by what I saw that I feel the need to explain why, especially since my word length for the overall review of Bilbao BBK Live won't allow me to go into too much detail, not that I should. As you'll learn eventually, other good bands played.

So where do I start?

Let's start with Jared Leto, their frontman and sometime-Hollywood actor. He arrives onstage now removed of his mohawk and in full-on Sunday Bloody Sunday-era Bono mode. His hair slicked back to the nth degree, shades on even though it's bloody dark, black cloak with a black vest underneath.

He is also, apparently, a guitar player. However, for all the time that a six-stringed instrument was handed to him he only seemed to play it for 20% of the time. He is also the singer of the band. That said, I don't think he sings for most of the time either. When he's not spouting words of such sanctimonious bilge he tries to get a reaction from the crowd that involves either screaming, jumping or just asking them to do his job for him and sing.

In the middle of the gig, he walks down the runway (and, to be fair, it's not something they asked to install - it was part of the main stage layout anyway) and does all of the above but without the

rest of his band and without the spectacle of the show, which we will get to shortly. If I, God forbid, had spent a good long while waiting for 30 Seconds To Mars to show up I'd be a little peeved that Leto spent a good quarter of the gig down in the middle or up above the sounddesk with his "LOOK AT ME, I AM YOUR BONO-WANNABEE KING!" posing and posturing.

Then there's the actual presentation of their show. I've seen many an arena/stadium rock show in my time but this pompous, slick, over-produced garbage made me wonder whether the ghost of mid-80s over-bloated stadium rock had come to haunt us in the Spanish mountains.

Did they have lights? They had enough to give Al Gore a heart attack. Did they have staging that made no sense? Well, there was a cross between a pyramid and the letter 'A' in the centre of the stage...answers on a postcard please...actually, no don't even waste your time. Did they have confetti and balloons? Indeedy.

But it's their visuals that really resonated in a true "WTF?" kind of way. It was sickly, sanctimonious, saccharine, sentimental rubbish. From pointless landscape shots of things that look big like valleys, mountains and seas to close ups of soldiers at war that are meant to be powerful but are actually powerfully patronising.

The 'highlight' is one song where lyrics that Leto is singing pop up on screen for people to, you'd presume, sing along to. This was striking for two reasons. Firstly, Leto is a terrible lyricist that makes Chris Martin look like this generation's Leonard Cohen. Secondly, it was so show-off-esque in terms of "Look what we can do with these font styles! You can't do that on Microsoft Powerpoint, you punks!" that it was quite funny.

It ends, mercifully, with one of the most carefully-managed stage invasions I have ever seen as many of their adoring fans stand around at the back of the stage jumping and singing. Incidentally, there are a lot of 30STM fans in attendance. It's hard to know whether to feel sorry for them or angry that they like such an awful band. But judging them would be harsh. It's not like they wrote the music.

I say this because, ultimately, it's the songs that are the sole reason why this is as unbearable as it is. It's trying to make important, sweeping statements filled with drama but what you get is a big black hole of nothing. There is no substance to their echoing guitars, their drum solos and their cliché-ridden phrases. For a band that are so convinced by their own abilities and so self-confident, it's odd that it all feels so vacuous.

Stadium/arena rock shows can be good things if done properly. Playing guitar for less than half of the time, shouting commands at the audience more than singing to them, showing off endlessly, imagery that doesn't mean anything, lots of lights for the sake of lots of lights, visuals that are patronising and, most importantly, songs that fail to hit the mark are not ways to go about achieving a spectacular headlining performance. It's an overly-slick, manufactured and cringeworthy performance that made me say quite loudly at the end...

"What the hell was that?"