

Episode 4: I Want to Believe (in the Power of Tom DeLonge)

At the time of writing and recording this script, there is a pandemic going on. At the time of releasing this, there will probably still be a pandemic going on, because it's not being handled particularly well. Like most people, I've been holed up in my apartment sort of relaxing into economic collapse. Obviously, I've spent most of my time on Twitter, watching everyone's collectively awful coping mechanisms.

On one of my daily scrolls, I found myself watching in real time as UK musician MIA – that's MIA of "live fast, die young, bad girls do it well" fame – had a meltdown about the UK government infecting people with coronavirus using the 5G network so they could collect data. Which is obviously... completely insane. Twitter's good like that – where previously you would have had to wait for a bizarre interview to drop in Vogue or something, now you can just scroll and absorb before moving on to some other completely insane shit until your brain is smooth and shiny, like a freshly laid chicken egg.

As I sort of skimmed this information and filed it away under "depressing", it got me thinking – what other bizarre shit do our celebrity overlords believe?

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition. Today, I'm thinking about celebrity conspiracy theories.

Ok so the introduction to this is a little misleading – I said I was thinking about celebrity conspiracy theories. Which sort

of implies I'm in "Elvis lives" territory. But I actually wanted to take a look at some conspiracy theories that celebrities believe. Because when I was watching MIA have her meltdown on Twitter, the first thing I felt was this incredible sense of disappointment. Well... that's not strictly speaking true. The first thing I felt was confusion, because I had no idea what she was on about. I looked it up, it turns out that there's a relatively widely held belief among certain people that the radiation from 5G towers is causing coronavirus symptoms and that the government is rolling it out anyway because they thirst for our data. While I don't doubt that the government thirsts for our data, the rest of it is pretty insane. But the second thing I felt was disappointment. To me, MIA is cool. Her art is really heavily rooted in politics, and she's got an excellent sense of style. So, to see her spouting a batshit conspiracy theory in the face of people actually dying from a pandemic brought on in the same way most disease outbreaks are – newfound proximity to each other and to the natural world – was just disappointing.

When I was talking about Post Malone in the first episode of this podcast, I mentioned that we often hold this hope that celebrities are smart people. Or at least that their world view aligns with ours. I think it's because the products these people put out – art, movies, music – all often have a very strong emotional connection for us as an audience. We

project onto the work, and by extension, often the artist. Which is why it's so devastating when your favourite actor or musician says or does something really stupid. Without any real reason to expect better, we still do. So I thought, let's dip our toes in and see what bites.

It's tempting to start these things somewhere whacky, because it's easier to laugh at people everyone thinks are a little zany. Like, if I said to you that Charlie Sheen thought Lizard People ran the media or something, that would seem fairly in character. But I think for me to dig up a point out of this, it's probably more useful to start somewhere innocuous, somewhere perhaps unexpected. We like Mark Ruffalo, right? He's in the Marvel movies as the Hulk. He does a lot of environmental activist work – notably for anti-fracking campaigns. He's a special kind of casually handsome, in a way where it's nice when he pops up as the protagonist in a romantic comedy because it feels like you could have met him in a bar somewhere if only the timing were right. He seems nice, no?

Well, he's also a 9/11 truther. For the uninitiated, 9/11 truthers believe, generally, that the collapse of the Twin Towers and attack on the Pentagon, were an inside job. They believe this for a variety of reasons, ranging from general suspicion of the government to raging anti-Semitism. That's just a general conspiracy theory rule, by the way. If you poke any of them hard enough, you end up back at anti-Semitism. There's a significant corner of the internet just dedicated to accusing Jewish people of running the government, the media, and secret lizard hordes. It is obviously

the worst corner of the internet and one of the things you should generally be careful of when partaking in a bit of light-hearted meme-making about jet fuel being unable to melt steel beams. Ruffalo, I'm going to give the benefit of the doubt to and say that he probably falls in the "generalised suspicion of the government" camp, given his otherwise fairly nice political leanings. And if that's where you're falling on the spectrum, I'm going to make a call and say that in the scheme of political conspiracy theories, this one the least offensive. I'm not saying I believe it – I think 9/11 was mostly the result of years of American global interference that was then exploited by people to further their own shitty dollar driven agenda. But it is the one where I'm a little bit like... if 50 years from now the CIA was like "Promise you won't be mad? It was us. Lol." I wouldn't be shocked. I'd be like "Of course it was, you pieces of shit."

So, if global terrorism isn't hitting that sweet spot of disgust, let's look at something else – let's look at Tom DeLonge. Now, Tom was the guitarist for Blink 182, who were drivers of the pop punk wave and writers of classic albums like *Enema of State*. Well... Tom is one of the 20% of Americans who believes in aliens. So much so that he co-founded the To The Stars Academy of Arts and Sciences, which is effectively a tech company devoted to UFOs... or UAP as they're now called. That's Unexplained Aerial Phenomena.

The board member bios on the company website really made me laugh because they read like, "Board member 1 – former consultant for NASA, Research

scientist at Stanford. Board member 2 – former operations director at the CIA. Board member three – guy who sold a lot of records in the early 00s.”

I'm not judging, I just think it's funny.

Anyway, going from guy making dick jokes to head of a large start up rooted very firmly in the belief that aliens are real and they are coming is... a jump? At the very least it shows a real investment in the idea that we are not alone. Here's the thing though. It's kind of paid off. He's... a bit correct.

In 2019, Tom DeLonge and the To The Stars Academy were part of the group that got the Pentagon to confirm that they were actually running a program investigating the presence of unidentified aerial phenomena on earth. The US military had known about flying saucers, recorded flying saucers, been studying flying saucers, and generally believe (to a point) in the potential presence of extra-terrestrial pilots, but just not telling anyone about it. And then a couple of months later, Tom and Co helped get the government to declassify a bunch of footage taken by fighter pilots of the unexplained aerial phenomena and publish it in the New York Times.

So, if we've seen two fairly significant conspiracy theories, with two fairly large celebrity supporters, why am I ending up at "maybe they're a bit right though?" Why am I not feeling the same level of sadness or disappointment here as I did when I saw MIA spouting garbage about the coronavirus? I think it has something to do with the level of threat to common sense that I feel when I encounter the

theory itself. Until you start getting into the aforementioned anti-Semitic territory that inevitably comes along with this, aliens and a suspicion that the CIA might be lying to you don't really feel like they have the potential to cause harm.

But something about the way the world is at the moment means that we've hit this point where conspiracy theories are making a jump from out of the shadows and into the mainstream a little bit. It hasn't really come from nowhere – there have been fringe theories about everything from the shape of the world to whether we've ever left it since... forever. But I think we're reaching a kind of critical mass now, where I can say things like "QAnon", "crisis actors" or "Alex Jones" and you'll sort of know what I'm talking about. Even if you don't know it in detail, there's a chance you've kind of passively encountered that theory before. Sometimes it's through a meme – you're consuming your 9000th TikTok video of the day, and some teenage boy stares down the lens and says "Jeffrey Epstein didn't kill himself". Or sometimes it's just through your Facebook profile – where that girl you vaguely remember from high school posts something about how essential oils cured her friend's cancer and she's glad she didn't vaccinate her kids. And then you click on her profile and you see that she got married and moved to Byron Bay and you think "of course you did, you fucking moron" and you hover over the unfriend button, but then you don't do it because the rush of fury you get from seeing her stupid smug face is a better kickstart than your morning coffee and you need to feel alive somehow. Or.... Something.

Anyway, what I'm saying is, the internet has really expanded your opportunity to access conspiracy theories. And not only that, it's made kinds of theories that gain traction whackier. For example, people have been saying that we didn't land on the moon since people landed on the moon. But in the 1970s, to broadcast that theory, Bill Kaysing (the guys who popularised it) had to self-publish a book "de-bunking" the landing using a bunch of photocopies stolen from NASA. And the theory took years to gain as much support as it has. Today, something as horrific as a school shooting can immediately have online detractors finding digital communities within hours of the news going out.

Even if disbelief in the moon landing itself is kind of fundamentally rooted in a distrust for the government, taken at its base level, you can kind of see why it might have gained the traction and longevity it did. Even if it's odd, not believing we could possibly end up among the stars seems like a fairly human impulse to me. Not believing that human beings could rip each other to shreds with bullets seems on the other hand seems... naïve at best. There's a similar mistrust for the government at play, but it seems so much more sinister. And it's found footing so much more easily. To the point where, in the case of the Sandy Hook massacre, it only took a couple of years to get from horrific shooting, to harassment lawsuit filed by victim's families against perpetrators of a conspiracy theory suggesting that the whole thing was staged and no children died. And that's all rooted in online communities.

While this weird collapse of the barriers for believability is happening, we've also seen a decrease in the barriers to celebrity – both as a state of being and as individual people. We still have the A-list, but suddenly they're managing their own Twitter accounts and spouting off "relatable" bullshit about wanting a burger or watching Netflix. And that's where you end up in this weird space of knowing that Mark Ruffalo is a 9/11 Truther. Or that Jim Carey doesn't believe in vaccines.

But then we also have a new class of influencers and digital superstars whose celebrity comes from their "relatable" bullshit, in the form of rapid fire vlogging and micro-blogging of their experiences and opinions. These people are accessible in a way that was previously removed from celebrity, and because that forms part of their brand, when they say something completely batshit, it often causes less of a traditional media stir than say, having a movie star claim that the deep state is coming for us in Vogue magazine. And that's how you have people like Shane Dawson, whose 23 million followers tune in to watch him talk about his life, make comedy sketches, and occasionally pepper in some theories on government lies. In fact, his conspiracy theory videos are so popular that he's started to spin them out into hour long productions that sit alongside his other more innocuous content. I watched one of them – and look, it is obvious that he has a lawyer who tells him what he can and can't put up, but in one of the moon landing videos he says, verbatim, "The government fakes so much shit. We've talked about 9/11, we've talked about crisis actors. Why wouldn't the moon landing be fake?"

These things are just thrown in there as side notes about "known" government lies, rather than insane fringe theories. So, this a two-pronged problem. The first is the changing nature of celebrity. When we look at Mark Ruffalo and Tom DeLonge, we associate them with a specific type of cultural product that is removed from themselves and their beliefs. Mark Ruffalo in a movie is just a nice bumbling guy. Tom DeLonge in Blink 182 is just a dude with a guitar. What would either of these people know? The vast majority of their audience is not invested in what they have to say as people. They like characters or an album, not their politics. And for those of us who do get overly emotionally invested in celebrities, it's also easier to disregard the things they say once they get to a point of being uncomfortable because we don't feel like they have any insider knowledge. That's not why we want them.

But with the advent of social media, we have a secondary wave of micro-celebrities who've built followings around themselves and their opinions. And that's maybe fine if you're looking for someone to tell you what kind of makeup brush to use, but less fine when you have someone telling you that they can prove that the US Democratic Party is privy to a secret ring of paedophiles run out of the basement of a pizza shop. Shane Dawson has 23 million followers, but there are smaller examples who are just as, if not more problematic. Alex Jones, who ran InfoWars and said the government was turning the frogs gay with fluoride in the water, had 2.4 million followers before YouTube deleted his channel. Other dedicated conspiracy theory channels have followers ranging

from the tens of thousands and into the millions. And they couch their insane theories in faux-scientific language to point to their insider knowledge and lend themselves validity.

The second part of the problem is the types of theories that gain traction. Conspiracy theories range in type from kind of fine to kind of bonkers. But, provided you're of sound mind about the rest of the world, what's the problem with believing that Elvis didn't die? Or that aliens are real? These things don't have a huge amount of impact on the world. But believing that vaccines don't work has quantifiable real-world consequences. We've had a vaccine for measles since the 1960s, but we're still seeing outbreaks because there's been a significant rise in anti-vax communities online. And that's just an example with a long history and faux-science behind it. That Democratic Party paedophile pizza shop thing I mentioned? Well, it's a real theory, and it had the real-world consequence of having someone shoot up the pizza place.

We're seeing social media platforms acknowledge that they need to stem the flow of misinformation. YouTube, for example, tried appending Wikipedia blurbs to videos on some conspiracy theories, and they've changed their recommendation algorithm for news to ensure that valid sources are placed first. But these companies rely on a business model that requires people to build online communities and share content. And they refuse, almost point blank, to reconsider the way they moderate that content. Which allows people to continue gain a level of celebrity based on the content

they share, regardless of whether or not it has the potential to do harm.

I think the current pandemic has really highlighted the need for better digital content moderation. I'm not a person who actively seeks out conspiracy theories and all it took for me to end up in "5G causes coronavirus" territory was a quick stumble on my otherwise fairly normal Twitter feed. And if I were more prone to an anti-science perspective it probably wouldn't be too hard to start me off on a path that might end in chem-trails, mind control and the death of my future child via eventual measles pandemic.

So... there you have it. I think it's worth stating for the record that I'm like one emotional breakdown and a bad acid trip away from being a conspiracy theorist. If you wanna talk to me about 9/11, hit me up. Dick Cheney made money off the Iraq War.

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Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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