

# THE EVOLUTION MARIO

**The Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter is back and better than ever**

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE · PHOTO CREDIT HAO ZENG

“**W**e can talk about whatever you want,” says Mario. Nothing was off limits, and he got candid.

It's 10 am and Gramercy Park Hotel's Rose Bar is occupied with less than a handful of people. An exclusive nightspot, during the day the space serves as a quiet guest lounge. The cavernous yet cozy space boasts velvet furnishings, a Maarten Baas billiard table, an impressive display of rotating artwork, and a yawning fireplace. Overflowing with character, it's the sort of place any artist could appreciate.



Mario is the quintessence of a musician when he arrives. The Grammy-nominated, Billboard chart-topping artist is wearing sunglasses (which he removes a couple of minutes into our chat), a long black, distressed tee that reveals a few of his tattoos, shredded light blue jeans, and layers of jewelry – necklaces, bracelets, and rings. The first words out of his mouth is that he likes this spot, which I'm happy to hear as I chose the location. To start his morning, he orders a mimosa and a chamomile tea.

This September, Mario's 3-year hiatus came to an end with the release of his latest single, "I Need More." From his fifth studio album *Paradise Cove* ( slated for release early next year), this was just a taste of his new sound. Mario rose to fame with songs that were basically "great conversations with women from a male's perspective" –with him singing hits like "Just a Friend" and swoon-worthy lyrics: "You should let me love you / Let me be the one to / Give you everything you want and need / Baby, good love and protection / Make me your selection / Show you the way love's supposed to be..." His new music was a departure from what his fans were used to and unfortunately, it

Now, he's ready to conquer the world – musically and as an entrepreneur. Next year, *Paradise Cove* will be released under Mario's new label, New Citizen. It was during the creation of his fifth studio album in 2013 ("Somebody Else" featuring Nicki Minaj was the first single released) that Mario decided to part ways with that label. That album was never released. "I thought it was time for me to grow in a different way and I wanted to challenge myself... to reinvent myself on all levels: spiritually, mentally, musically. I knew it was a big risk, because now I'll be competing with the same labels that I was signed to, that I know give bigger budgets –but I was like, 'Ya know what? It's about the music.'" *Paradise Cove* will be a bit darker and edgier than his past albums. "I'm not afraid of being open anymore, more vulnerable, and more myself as an artist. This project is a little more me than my other ones, because I have more creative control," says Mario, the latter is the main reason he decided to go independent.

In those three years out of the spotlight, half of his time was spent "negotiating out of this deal,"

while the other half was spent working on new music and just living life. His plan: "Get my foundation right and just come back swinging." During this time, Mario relocated from Los Angeles to

## WHAT WOULD FANS BE SURPRISED TO FIND OUT ABOUT YOU?

"How attentive I am. How weird I am. How much of a loner I am, but at that same time I've very social. How deep I am as a person and how deep I can go when it comes to relating or connecting with someone. I love animals. I have a dog. His name is Smoky. He's not a dog though –he's a human. I know a lot of people say that but sometimes it be too scary. 'You've been here before too!? We've both been here before, Smoky!'" He laughs.

left them needing more *from him*. "It was really hard to get my fans to like that record. I think people liked the video more than they liked the song... I look at it as a beautiful thing; it reminds me of where I can go, where I belong, and the level which I left off on. People still want and yearn for that realism, that soul. It's like, 'We hear some of that music today, but you're bigger than that...' And I respect that. I knew that was going to happen but I still wanted to do it just because I was having fun. I know my lane is more timeless, more classic."

"I Need More" was inspired by a conversation with a close friend one night while they were out partying. Hungry for a more authentic life, at that time Mario needed more: more substance, more motivation. He needed a muse to push him to the next level. He found a few, but there's one lady in particular that is his "light bulb in the dark room." A girlfriend? He shifts in his chair, takes a sip of his mimosa, then laughs. "That word is too much pressure." He pauses. A big smile spreads across his face. "It's a girlfriend. She deserves for me to be honest right now," he says about this special lady he met through mutual friends at the club. She's very different from the other women he has dated, he tells me.

Miami to "catch a vibe" and create. "That city was made for people who like living the fancy lifestyle, the fast lifestyle, the women and partying..." he says of the Magic City. Miami was fun but it wasn't conducive to him creating, so after a year and a half there, he decided it was best for him to get back to L.A. Was there pressure to return to music? "Absolutely! There's always pressure... I allow the pressure to motivate me instead of intimidate me. I'm from Baltimore. I don't know nothing but pressure," he says with a smile. He credits his grandmother, who passed away when he was 12, for teaching him many great life lessons, including how to deal with life's pressures. "I learned how important a foundation was from her, and how important a relationship with God was, and how important it was to work hard for what you wanted."

The lifestyle that Mario had grown accustomed to no longer suited him. His desire to live more authentically, become more conscious and sensitive prompted him to make a number of changes: he became a vegan, started practicing yoga and doing exercises to unblock his cords. "Every time you have sex with a person or you're in a relationship with a person and you connect with them on all levels, you create cords together. These cords

## ON THE RADIO, IN THE CLUB...

The next single he'll release is "Help You." "It's one of the few songs I heard and instantly fell in love with it. It's basically about a girl who is very independent and doesn't feel like a relationship is going to be beneficial to her life. But as a man, I'm saying, 'Look, I see you're independent... you don't want to owe nobody, but let me help me. You don't have to love on your own.' It's kinda a reggae vibe, you can dance to it. It's sexy." A dance mix that'll be in the club? "It'll be in the club, on the radio, in your car, in your bedroom, it'll be everywhere. It'll be in you," he says suggestively. Nice. "She said *nice*." He smiles.



don't leave, unless you consciously detach yourself from that person so you don't carry that energy into the next relationship... Becoming more spiritually-conscious is more painful because you can feel it and you notice the different vibrational patterns and karmic patterns that you continue to create over and over. And I was like, 'I don't want that anymore.'" This detox also meant starving his ego. "If I'm going to sleep with a girl, it's going to be on my terms, not on my ego's terms. It's going to be authentic —because we *actually* have a connection." His new outlook has even made him view music differently. "Before it was like, 'Let's get a hot song, put it out and get some success.' Now it's like, 'Let's create music that's going to last forever and affects people's lives.'"

Feeling empowered and spiritually-awake, in the beginning of 2016 Mario began writing a self-help / lifestyle book. The book is his perspective on growing up in the business, how he has handled it, and the tools he has used to grow, move forward, and connect. "It gets pretty deep. I touch on some things spiritually, metaphysically, but I write it in a practical way whereas a 16-year-old could still understand it." To establish a true connection, the energy needs to flow, he explains. When he's with a girl, he helps clear her energy. "By us clearing our energy, we're going to have a much more amazing moment together than us carrying all this bull crap, egotistical stuff — all the things we pick up from other people. You may be having thoughts or feelings that aren't yours and you don't even know. Same with me, but I'm conscious of the fact that I do. Some people aren't... That's what my book talks about too, teaching people how to connect on a real level again." says Mario, who has read a list of books on a variety of subjects to get to this point of "self-liberation."

Mario's extraordinary depth may come as a surprise to fans as it's not something he normally shows in interviews or even through social media. Impressed with his confidence and the transparency he's shared with me in the hour we spent together, I have to ask, how at just 30 years old, are you so wise? "You want to know the truth? I really feel like I've been here before —millions of times. I feel like I've been everything," he says sincerely, referring to reincarnation. "It's coming back to me. When I'm just naturally me, the things that I'm attracted to or that interest me are things that when I read up on it, it's like, 'I already know this!' I've practiced Tantra before. Ohmygod. I've practiced Reiki before. I know spiritual healing... So, I just apply it to my life in a real way, because I see the result."

If you really want to change your life, Mario suggests that you return to nature. Nine months ago, he went to Joshua Tree —a place he visits often to look at the stars and talk to God— equipped with a knife, flashlight, and pepper spray and slept out there alone. "It's really dark. I wanted to face some fears... There's nothing out there for miles and miles. I went out there with a blanket and a pillow, found a boulder and I slept behind it. If you haven't had a lovemaking session with nature, you should definitely do it. It's so healthy for you. *You*, as a writer, would enjoy it," he says with a big smile. **ML**

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## WE WANT MORE!

You ranked #98 on *Billboard's* "Artist of the Decade" list at the end of the 2000s decade...

"That's insane, man. To be in that category. It's a lot of pressure." He laughs. "Nah, it's a blessing. I feel like this lifetime, for me, is a special one, and I just want to do everything and be as authentic as possible and do everything in my power to just be as bright as possible. Not just for singing, but just a voice and a creative and an inspiration and everything. Any gift I have, I want it to illuminate. No doubts. No fears."

What was a song you sang when you were younger?

"It was Boyz II Men's 'I'll Make Love To You.' I went around singing that song. I would also sing Troop's 'All I Do is Think of You.' Michael Jackson, Jackson 5. Stevie Wonder was my go-to... My mom started taking me to the barber shop and I would sing and all the barbers would pay me \$10. I would walk out of there with \$100. I'm like, 'Mom, I could get paid doing this.' That's a lot of money for a kid at that time." [Note: Mario serenaded me with a few lines of Troop's song, and I had to consciously keep my jaw from dropping. He's *good*.]

What's it like when your song is on and you're with a lady?

"It definitely changes things. For me, it's great to see the reaction because I'm a very, very passionate-central person... I always set vibes. She opens up more —let's just say that. It's just more of an opening

invitation, more of a beautiful experience." It's you on all different levels. "Right! OK, cool, you get it. It's like being stimulated from every — that's my thing, man, I think understanding the way the anatomy of the body works and sound, taste, and smell. All those things I've dove into these last few years... I like pleasing women. It's not just about sex. Woman can be cool to hang out with, talk to about different things in life. There's so much depth there, especially if it's the right woman. Women birth us, you cultivate the male and feminine energy within your womb and you birth it. So what makes you think that she can't help you do the same thing in the physical realm?"

You had roles in films *Step Up* and *Freedom Writers*, do you plan to do more acting?

"That's my next adventure. I'm about to start taking classes again and really taking it serious. Acting is something you really got to dig your feet and your heart into. There's a lot of competition and it's something that I feel like I would have to take really, really serious. I don't think I've taken it that serious in the past few years."

What are you watching on TV?

"When I moved back [to L.A.], I didn't get a TV. I was in a space of not caring what was on TV and more about caring what's on the inside of me...But I have social media, that pretty much is television. The last show I watched? I'll watch Netflix on my phone *Dexter*, *Narcos*, and a few other shows."