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Ben Walters

Culture

## How Wes Lang and M. Shadows Pushed Each Other to New Creative Zones for Avenged Sevenfold's New Album

The metal band's new album *Life Is But a Dream...* features original paintings from the revered artist, but their music and his art has been inspiring each other for some time now.

The first thing Wes Lang notices as Matt Sanders logs into Zoom is his friend's new hairdo, a grown-out sort of mohawk-mullet. "How scummy is that?" Matt comments with a grin.

"You're a dick," Wes says, smiling back even bigger.

Listening to these two playfully roasting each other, the depth of their friendship is apparent.

Matt Sanders is M. Shadows, the frontman for Avenged Sevenfold, one of the biggest names in modern heavy metal. Since 1999, the band has risen from underground metalcore to headbanging rock stardom, selling over 10 million albums along the way.

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Wes Lang is an outsider artist who produces nervy imagery often inspired by Americana. Much to his own surprise, his art has occasionally landed in the center of the mainstream, like when he designed [an entire merchandise collection](#) for Kanye West or a [fashion line with the label Amiri](#).

Both Sanders and Lang create art that celebrates life and accepts death. In June, Avenged Sevenfold will release their eighth studio album, *Life Is But a Dream...* with artwork—plus other collectible pieces on different vinyl covers—made by Lang.

The cover's haunting, scythe-wielding reaper, rendered in feverish brush strokes, reflects a new era of Avenged. It's the band's first record in nearly seven years, and comes after what Sanders calls a "deep, months-long existential crisis" of his related to some soul searching, reading Albert Camus in French, and ego death brought on by psychedelics.

In today's digital-first landscape, the record cover can feel like a relic of the past. But Sanders and his band care deeply about the old and the new—see Avenged's cutting-edge work in [the web3 space](#)—and Lang brought an obsession with the format. He'd text Sanders snapshots of in-progress paintings, and Sanders would return with demo snippets of songs. That communication led to a three-day session in which Lang painted 20 pieces—simple, menacing, and ethereal—that would become the album's artwork.

*GQ* got Lang and Sanders together to talk about friendship and creative collaboration, the role of the album cover in the streaming era, and finding solace in pushing forward for the sake of art.



Courtesy of Wes Lang and Avenged Sevenfold

**GQ:** Matt, when did you first discover Wes's work?

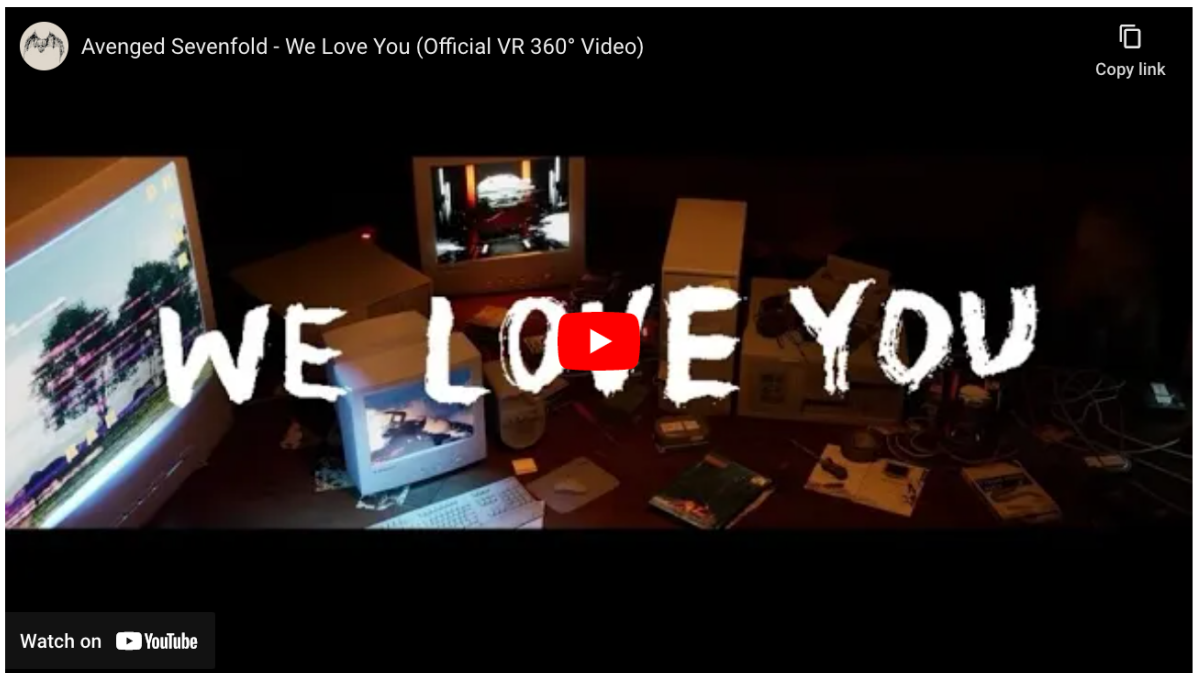
**Sanders:** I was introduced to Wes's work years ago through Benji and Joel Madden [of the band] Good Charlotte. I just fell in love with it, and I was like, "Dude, you got to introduce me to this guy." Eventually, [Benji] put us on a text message together, and we kept trying to hang out, and then finally, I went down to [Wes'] warehouse and was blown away by what he's got going on down there. It is a pure, creative space. It just locked me in.

**Lang:** I met Benji and Joel because Joel wrote me a blind email off a blog I used to have years ago. I knew who the band was, but I never knew their names, so I just replied to this email, and we started talking. When I moved to LA, the day that I got here, I went and had lunch with him. I would say we hit it off, when Matt came here, very easily.

**Sanders:** Everything he was doing and the little things he was writing on his paintings really spoke to me. We just started talking about punk rock, hardcore, and all sorts of stuff. We hung out for a few years before we did anything together.

**Lang:** I know you guys were developing music, and I was doing my shit. Then there happened to be this convergence where I created this body of work, and they were finishing the record, and I was making it and texting Matt each piece as I was finishing it.

**Sanders:** There's this painting called "Nobody," and it deeply affected me. I was going through my own thing at the time. We would put up this painting in the studio while creating the song "Nobody." Wes would send us stuff, and it was just giving us all these ideas to go bolder with the music. The art was influencing the music. And then I was sending Wes demos of stuff, and hopefully, in turn, years later or a few months later, that was helping him do this art that he did for us, and it all converged.





**This album cover is quite different from any the band has made before. When did you realize you wanted to do something drastically different?**

**Sanders:** Everything from the music videos to the stage production to the art to the music was equally as important to us on this one. I mean, in this day and age, radio and MTV barely exist, and there's fewer drivers than there once were. For us, it was about creating something that truly encapsulates everything we're trying to do. You need to have all those other elements because you're speaking to a more hardcore audience now, and it's important to really take care of your people.

In the past, [the art] always came a few months before the record was done. This one was a lot different. We'd been working on this stuff for a year out. A lot of the reason this record's taking so long to get out is that we wanted to make sure all these other elements lined up, not just the music you're going to be hearing.

Rock is not the coolest music to listen to now. It's not at the forefront of culture, so we need to stake our claim right now and do something different instead of resting on our laurels and trying to rekindle that 2019, 1999 flavor. For us, it's important to move forward, and the art was a huge part of that because Wes is a contemporary person and... go ahead, Wes.

**Lang:** I was just going to say you made a really good point. Instead of kicking back and making what you'd think your fans want, you're pushing yourselves. And that's what inspired me with the work I was making for you. I watched you guys mature greatly as people and musicians making this record and challenging yourselves. That comes with age and experience and not necessarily taking financial gain into account when creating your artwork, which is quite admirable and not very common in any field. Especially in yours as well, where you're not going on a fucking greatest hits tour, and you could just go do that. But you're going out and pushing this whole new thing, and it's what should be done. People should be paying attention to what you're doing in the music business because it's very rare, man.

GAME OVER

MATTEL

NOBODY

WE LOVE YOU

COSMIC

BEAUTIFUL MORNING

EASIER

G

(O)RDINARY

(D)EATH

LIFE IS BUT A DREAM...

**Wes, what did that process look like for creating the artwork?**

**Lang:** I made 20 pieces in about 12 to 15 hours spread over three days to make the whole thing. I get in zones, and I just go, and time stops. My studio has no windows, so you're in a weird time-stop, but it was frantic and fast. It's acrylic on paper. They're two and a half by three and a half feet each, something in that area.

It's probably the fastest group of work I've ever made, to do 20 works of art that I'm not only proud of but willing to put into the world on this scale in the amount of time I did it. That's just letting God happen. I had nothing to fucking do with that shit. The older I get, the easier it is for me to let go and know my purpose and use my physical body to execute my purpose, so time is meaningless. It was really fast, really fucking fast.

**You have both played with themes and symbols commonly associated with death. Dark imagery can have double meanings, whether symbolizing a celebration of life or a recognition of mortality. Matt, do these symbols go deeper than just providing dark, gothic imagery? What does the artwork mean to you?**

**Sanders:** Earlier in our career, it was very surface-level. I experienced a deep, months-long existential crisis in the middle of this record. I hate the headlines about this, but it was brought on by [the psychedelic] 5-MeO-DMT. I did that a few times, and I had to work out things in my life in terms of time, purpose, or meaning. So on the new record, the way we play with death is, for me, almost like absurdism, meaning finding purpose in your own life and celebrating the time we have here.

You can take it two different ways. For me, going that deep into that fear [can give you] total freedom to create your purpose, and when I see the things that Wes writes, and I see the things that he's pulling from, that spoke to me so much more. This is finding the light because nothing matters. Your purpose doesn't have to be what everyone else's purpose is, whether it's love or your family or creating bold art, or just existing and wanting to be and not suffer. More than any other, this record needed this artwork to accompany it because it does come from a deeper, different spot than [whereas] I would say earlier in our career we were playing with these themes at a more surface level. This one tugs at the heartstrings a little deeper because it's very meaningful to me, and I think a lot of people go through this at some point in their life.





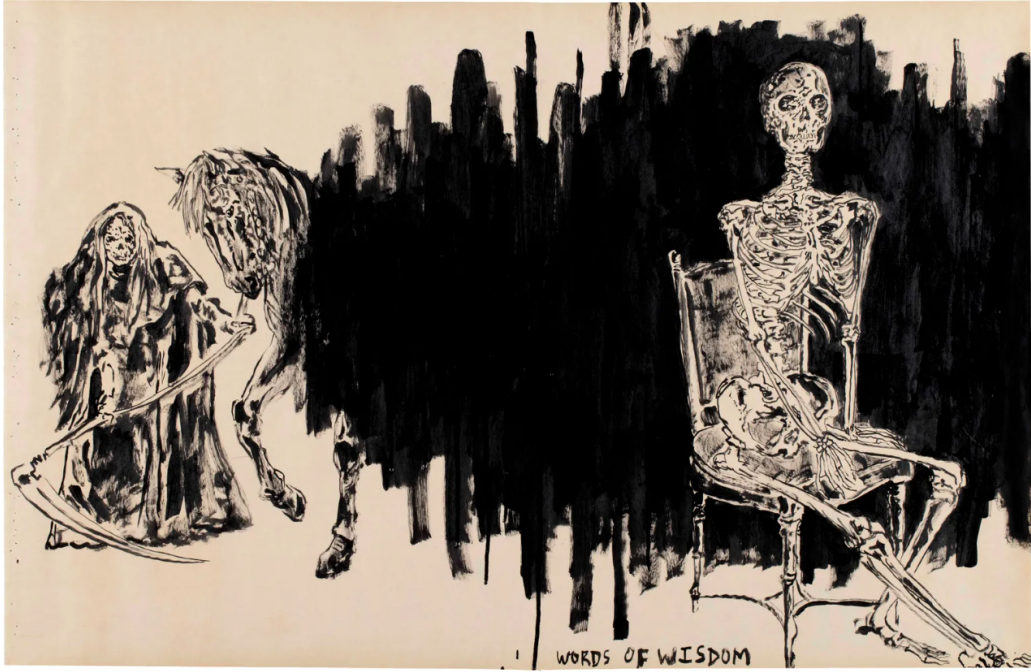
Courtesy of Wes Lang and Avenged Sevenfold

**What about you, Wes? Why are you drawn to those symbols and icons?**

**Lang:** It's very straightforward. I practice Taoism, and my work is just my interpretation of the Tao. It's a practice of acceptance of death; it's a practice of acceptance of contrarian ideas and acceptance of both sides of the spectrum on any and all things. Finding your purpose is not really my thing. I think that you just are. You're born with your purpose, and it's how willing you are to do the hard work to be that thing because it's very easy in this world to be sidetracked by so many different things, especially in this particular age that we're living in. There's a lot of focus on making people feel like they don't have enough; they aren't good enough. Their thoughts and their belief systems are wrong. It's so fucking confusing to be alive right now. It makes no sense at all out there, so I find my practice of dedicating my work and my personal life to furthering the ideas of the Tao Te Ching is the thing that keeps me going. I'm a hermit. I paint, I hang out with my wife and son and a couple of people, and I live a very monastic life, and that's how I can get through it.

Everybody should do their best to do that for themselves, just for themselves, not for anybody else. I think one of the hardest parts to deal with is—and I've gotten to the other side of it—but succeeding is not the easiest thing to stomach because it turns your output into a commodity. I've been very good about not letting that aspect of making artwork dictate what I'm going to make. I'm just going to make what I want to fucking make, and if someone happens to want it, that's fantastic, but if they don't, I had to make it anyway. It's not made for money. It's made for me and hopefully for people to look at it and walk away feeling better than they did when they saw it.





Courtesy of Wes Lang and Avenged Sevenfold

**You both have mentioned growth and progression as artists and the risk of losing an established audience. But I'm wondering if it feels more rewarding when you're able to have people meet you in these new places you didn't expect them to follow you to. Does it make you feel more seen as an artist and individual?**

**Lang:** I never really felt seen, if I'm honest with you. I don't know the answer to that question.

**Sanders:** I've thought about this a lot because we constantly have to put out records. One theory I always live by is that every piece of work has to find its audience. Just because someone bought [the Avenged Sevenfold albums] *The Stage* or *Hail to the King* does not mean that they're ready, willing, or even going to want *Life is but a Dream...*, but I believe so deeply that it touches me, and that it will touch other people. The art has to find those people, and it takes time to meld into society or culture, and that's okay. That's totally fucking great because everything's a little bit of a challenge.



**Lang:** There are bodies of artwork that I've made that have literally taken 10 years for people to grab onto. It all goes back to making what feels good, and eventually, an audience will find you. Please don't write this [to be] misconstrued as [us] being cocky fucking pricks because it couldn't be more opposite. I mean, him and I are two very insecure motherfuckers. We're just getting through.

You make things so that you can feel good for fractions of time, and the more that you get to create things, those fractions of time start to build up, and then it helps build your being into being much more relaxed. I suffer from panic attacks, and I've learned how to manage them. [Matt,] I don't know if you deal with that shit at all, but I've had unbearable, horrible anxiety for most of my adult fucking life. I have no self-worth at all, so I make art to combat that feeling and create self-worth. The more you create, the more you grow, and then you become more comfortable in your fucking skin.

**Sanders:** I definitely have my issues with that, and I think as I get older, the people I respect and love, they're not the biggest bands. They're the bands that are deeply stepping into what they are. They're unique, and they're different, and they're rough around the edges. I do the same thing with art. The message is, "Do what you want to do and make the world a more colorful place for everyone else," because I love seeing all that juxtaposition around the world, and I think that's what I wish art and artists would do more in our genre, specifically.



**Do you have any early memories of being at the record store and seeing particular album artwork that has stuck with you over the years?**

**Lang:** That was my entire childhood. I grew up in record stores, and my father eventually owned one. My entire existence is because of album artwork and the music inside those albums. I grew up in New Jersey, very close to New York City. My father is a rabid record collector, so my weekends would be going into the city with him and going to record stores and just spending all fucking day shopping for records on the weekends. And I mean, it's endless, my list.

The most important to me are *Bad Music for Bad People* by The Cramps and any and all things that have to do with The Misfits. I still have all of that shit, man. I've got every record I ever bought. My dad's a jazz guy, so I grew up looking at a lot of the artwork on old jazz albums. It was these graphic design versions of abstract expressionism and incredibly beautiful black-and-white photography of the musicians. I can't explain the depths of depravity which my father went through with collecting records. Some of the walls in our house were basically held up by records.





Courtesy of Wes Lang and Avenged Sevenfold

**Sanders:** My dad was a record collector, but my era is more CDs because I was born in 1981. I remember going into Bionic Records in Orange County, but it was still about the art because you had a physical product. I remember going through my dad's Beatles records, all of his Boston records, his Zeppelin records. As I moved into my era of music and CDs, it was all about Iron Maiden and a lot of black metal. Death metal had great covers, too: Blind Guardian, At the Gates. It was so important. The aesthetic and the way you presented yourself as a band was so important back then.

I do miss that era, but I'm also trying to find how we capture a little of that now. Maybe it's with T-shirts. Maybe it's just going all in with the live show. It makes you think deeper and a little harder about how you'll get the vibe across because people aren't necessarily going to the record store or buying that vinyl or CD to go through everything. I definitely have an affinity for that time, but I also like to think forward and go, *Okay, where is this going, and how can we give that next generation similar feelings to what it's like to discover a band and discover music?*





Courtesy of Wes Lang and Avenged Sevenfold