

Style

UFOs are suddenly a serious news story. You can thank the guy from Blink-182 for that.

By [Dan Zak](#)

May 30, 2018

At the turn of the millennium, Blink-182 was everywhere. On the cover of the pop-punk band’s smash album, “Enema of the State,” a busty nurse with a lustful grin snapped on a latex glove. At MTV beach concerts, sunburned masses moshed to the No. 1 hit “All the Small Things.” But frontman Tom DeLonge — the one with the angsty, adolescent singing voice — had been nurturing an offstage hobby that was decidedly out of the mainstream.

With his first record-deal payout as a fledgling teenage rock star, DeLonge had bought a computer to research the prospect of intelligent life beyond Earth. And after Blink-182 made him a fortune, he further indulged his fascination with the paranormal.

He co-wrote a 700-page novel about UFOs.

He brainstormed a film about skateboarders who become paranormal detectives.

He produced websites buzzing with stories about Bigfoot and disintegrating mummies.

Now in his early 40s, with his music career cooled but his financial resources apparently intact, DeLonge has channeled those bizarre passions into his next act.

You’ve seen it without knowing it. Remember that wild news in December about a secret Pentagon UFO program? And those grainy military videos showing radar images of unexplained phenomena — white, Tic-Tac-shaped objects that appear to fly at remarkable speeds, at impossible angles, without wings or exhaust?

Tom DeLonge helped ring the alarm about those things, as part of his new business venture: To the Stars Academy of Arts and Science. For his advisory board, DeLonge recruited physicists, aerospace experts and former Department of Defense officials, who have been talking publicly about UFOs and arguing that the government has failed to fully investigate them.

In the past six months, DeLonge’s associates have appeared on CNN and Fox News, written for The Washington Post and been cited in the New York Times — usually in the context of those eerie videos.

“What the f--- is that thing?” a Navy pilot says in [a video released by To the Stars in March](#), but perhaps the more pertinent question is: How did the guy from Blink-182 get wrapped up in it?

Rich men have the luxury of looking to the stars for investment and wish fulfillment. SpaceX founder Elon Musk wants to colonize Mars. Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen wants to make interplanetary travel cheap and routine. Amazon chief executive Jeffrey P. Bezos, who owns The Washington Post, envisions moving industry off Earth and shipping products down from space.

Tom DeLonge says he wants to build “a perpetual funding machine” to investigate UFOs and thereby advance our own species.

At a launch event for To the Stars Academy in Seattle last fall, he explained that he was expanding his small entertainment venture — which has mostly published his graphic novels and books about UFOs and the paranormal — into a far more ambitious scientific operation, to explore “the most controversial secret on Earth.”

DeLonge, who was unavailable for comment, explained at the launch that he had used his fame to meet with the keepers of that secret, in “clandestine encounters” in “desert airports” and “vacant buildings deep within Washington, D.C.”

Some of those people sat behind DeLonge onstage, including former intelligence officer Luis Elizondo, the former director of a hush-hush UFO program at the Pentagon.

“The phenomenon is indeed real,” Elizondo said when it was his turn to speak. Just days before, the 22-year Defense Department veteran had submitted a resignation letter to the Pentagon, citing its disregard of “overwhelming evidence” that unexplained phenomena have been interfering with the U.S. military.

Elizondo had overseen the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, quietly created in 2007 by then-Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) with the encouragement of a reclusive Nevada billionaire named Robert Bigelow. Like DeLonge, Bigelow made his fortune through earthly pursuits (real estate) but was fascinated by the otherworldly; he had funded research into crop and cattle mutilations. After he got Reid’s attention, Bigelow’s aerospace company then won the \$22 million contract to run the Pentagon’s secret program, [as first reported by the New York Times late last year](#). (Reid and Bigelow did not respond to requests for comment.)

Despite its peculiar mandate, Bigelow Aerospace’s output was typical of federal bureaucracy: It produced paper. There was a 490-page report on alleged UFO sightings, and a series of studies on experimental physics. One study written for the Defense Intelligence Agency (“Traversable Wormholes, Stargates, and Negative Energy”) urged federal research into interstellar travel and was illustrated with a childish drawing of a dinosaur greeting Albert Einstein through a hole in the space-time continuum.

But the secret program’s [collection](#) of [weird military videos](#) was what made headlines, starting with [the December New York Times article](#). Whatever is in the videos “isn’t human, it’s not natural, it’s under artificial control,” says Eric W. Davis, the astrophysicist who wrote the study on wormholes and stargates. “We don’t know where it comes from. But it’s here, and has been here for some time.”

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Davis, who works for a Bigelow subcontractor called Earthtech International, is but one player in the web of UFO enthusiasts who are interconnected by the secret Pentagon program and To the Stars Academy. There is also Earthtech's chief executive, Stanford-trained physicist Harold Puthoff, who once devoted serious study to the work of self-described "mystifier" Uri Geller, the 1970s "Tonight Show" guest who claimed he could bend spoons with his mind.

When Puthoff heard about DeLonge's interest in extraterrestrial phenomena, he reached out — and, like Elizondo, ended up with a new job after Pentagon funding for UFO research dried up. He's now vice president for science and technology for To the Stars. Elizondo is its director of global security and special programs.

Elizondo and Puthoff were among the key voices quoted in the blockbuster front-page Times article that revealed the covert existence of the Pentagon's UFO program. The story drew millions of readers online, with the videos of flying shapes and incredulous pilots murmuring "My gosh!" and "Look at that thing!"

Though DeLonge's new venture got a nod in the article, the rock star himself was not mentioned. Nonetheless, To the Stars was ready for its moment.

"STUNNING NEW YORK TIMES FRONT PAGE EXPOSE" the company declared in a news release. The homepage of its new website featured a button labeled "INVEST."

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It's a new year and I'm celebrating the fact that we have forever changed the conversation about UFOs!! Even I'm surprised at the massive shift that was made in legitimizing and de-stigmatizing the subject that has finally made its way into the mainstream- front page and multiple stories in the NYT plus Washington Post, Politico, CNN, NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox News, Scientific American...you name it. I accomplished the first step in what I've set out to do and I want to thank you for hanging in there and being part of the journey. So many obstacles and delays, but we did it. Now that To The Stars has hit the stratosphere, we're hard at work updating the company to reflect the massive growth opportunities that are knocking at our door, including negotiating media deals to tell the story, ongoing meetings with potential industry partners and the team working tirelessly on the biz plan. We have already accomplished what so many said couldn't be done. And its only the beginning. Being able to see one of my dreams come true in my lifetime is such a gift. It is an honor to be able to make music but so many people like to type-cast me as only that. Let this be a reminder to all of us to hold on to your dreams, don't ever let someone pigeon-hole you, laugh at your passions or tell you it is a waste of time. Don't be deterred. Dream big and work fearlessly to make it real.

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"What if people knew that these were real?" DeLonge sang on [the 1999 track "Aliens Exist."](#) In fact, most Americans believe in extraterrestrial life. Still, the subject carries the odor of crazy, so the recent news coverage of the videos was "huge," says Jan Harzan, director of the Mutual UFO Network, a group that investigates sightings.

"Basically, it made UFOs go mainstream," Harzan says. "UFOs are real. And it represents advanced technology in our skies. If we want to advance as a civilization, this is something we have to focus on."

The 2004 video highlighted by the Times is a touchstone for To the Stars, which put out its own report that, with its blacked-out passages, resembled a declassified government document. The report described how the unidentified object off the coast of California moved "in a manner that seemed to defy the laws of flight physics" and how the F/A-18 pilots, greeted upon their return by TVs playing "Men in Black" and "The X-Files," felt their observations were not taken seriously. One pilot, furious at the ridicule, sent detailed notes to an aunt. "Keep this because this is important stuff," the pilot wrote.

Yet the report from To the Stars is not a government document, according to a Pentagon spokesperson. Dated Sept. 7, 2017, it was created 13 years after that UFO incident, as To the Stars geared up to court investors.

When the Times article appeared in December, astronomer Jill Tarter thought to herself: "Here we go again." Co-founder of the SETI Institute, Tarter has spent her career searching for signs of life beyond Earth, and over the years she has repeatedly encountered the same names — people who believe we've been visited by aliens. Tarter is not so convinced.

The Times article cited Bigelow and Puthoff, whose interest in the paranormal is no secret. Tarter says Bigelow once pitched SETI on a project to investigate alien sightings and offered to fund it.

"It's hard to walk away from money," Tarter says, but Bigelow "was so very convinced that we have been visited, and I couldn't find it credible, and he didn't offer any evidence."

And the article, co-written by two Times veterans, also gave a byline to freelancer Leslie Kean. The author of books on UFOs and the afterlife (which received blurbs of praise from Puthoff), Kean had previously been given an exclusive on the To the Stars launch for a [laudatory HuffPost article](#) about DeLonge's start-up: "Inside Knowledge About Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Could Lead To World-Changing Technology."

"I just hope they have success," Kean later [told Open Minds UFO Radio](#). "I think what Tom [DeLonge] has done is extraordinary." (Kean and the Times declined to comment.)

On its website, To the Stars bills the UFO videos as "the first official evidence" of "unidentified aerial phenomena" (while promising "THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING"). But an online community of skeptics has swarmed the videos, noting that the "glowing aura" in one video resembles [a common infrared effect](#) caused when a hot object, such as a jet engine, is seen against a cold background, such as high-altitude clouds.

“DeLonge had been promising so much for such a long time” and “people were either becoming very cynical or gathering a sense of real expectation,” says Robert Sheaffer, a former Silicon Valley engineer and former chairman of the Bay Area Skeptics. Now, he says, To the Stars has simply put forward a “a couple more blurry videos that are similar to the blurry videos we’ve had before this.”

The latest blurry video, released by To the Stars in March, features a blip zooming at low altitude off the East Coast in 2015. Some debunkers reasoned that it was a big, slow-moving bird that looked fast only because of the angle and movement of the observing jet.

An official with the Defense Intelligence Agency maintains that the hype over the secret Pentagon UFO program is misleading.

“Some out there seem to be making this into more than it really is,” said the official, who was granted anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly. The program, he said, was not created to investigate unearthly technology but simply to prepare for aerospace advances by foreign adversaries — and was shuttered in 2012 because “there was limited value in what was produced.”

But that, argues Christopher Mellon, is exactly the problem.

Mellon, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, is another adviser to DeLonge's team. Mellon says there have been numerous other incidents along the East Coast in which unidentified flying objects have apparently penetrated U.S. defenses. There are more videos yet to be shared, he says, and "hard technical data corroborated by no-nonsense military personnel."

Are these things Russian? Chinese? Or from some alien civilization? Whatever they are, the government has not been taking it seriously enough, Mellon argues. (The Pentagon declined to comment.) The situation reminds him of the muddled period before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“Instead of being intrigued or even electrified by worrisome data,” he says, “various agencies and departments are failing to share information or take action.”

This is why Mellon, Elizondo and other credentialed individuals with advanced degrees and decades of high-clearance government service have attached their reputations to a semiretired rock star with a sideline in paranormal fiction. At least *someone*, they argue, is taking their concerns seriously.

“I think people look at him as a rock-n’-roller turned pseudo-scientist,” says Elizondo, “but once you get to know who he is, Tom is more of a scientist who happens to be a talented musician.” His endeavor “is about telling the American people the truth.”

For Elizondo, transparency on this issue is paramount. “We trust the American people to know that Kim Jong Un has thermonuclear weapons pointed at L.A.,” he says. “We trust the American people to know there’s a potential Ebola pandemic that could come out of Africa. And yet we don’t trust the American people with information that there is unidentified phenomena in our airspace, and that we don’t know how it works?”

2014 2016 UFOs are suddenly a serious news story. You can thank the guy from Blink-182 for that. The Washington Post DeLonge's goals, though, reach beyond national security. To the Stars promises to develop "next-generation" concepts for propulsion in space, according to its prospectus, and harness "warp drive metrics" and telepathic powers.

There is also a somewhat mystical mission: "to present a positive and unifying message to all generations, in every country, in every belief system, that the growth of consciousness that we all desire can start here, right now," DeLonge said at his October launch.

It seems to be getting off to a slow start. As of mid-March, To the Stars had raised \$2.5 million from a few thousand investors — not quite enough to achieve faster-than-light travel or to solve whatever mystery is unfolding in the skies. DeLonge lent To the Stars \$600,000 to get off the ground, and the company is required to pay him \$100,000 in yearly royalty fees.

For now, To the Stars' only deliverables are DeLonge's novels, some branded coffee mugs and clothing, and swag from his current rock band, Angels and Airwaves. The latest news from the company was an April 3 news release touting the upcoming sequel to DeLonge's novel "Sekret Machines." The release hyped Elizondo and Mellon's involvement in the company, lending a dash of national-security authority to a niche-market entertainment product. The novel is about explorers who "locate an ancient tablet that may hold the answers to humanity's greatest question": Are we alone in the universe?

The novel — "based on actual events" — is available in September, starting at \$24.95.

 Comments

Dan Zak

Dan Zak is a reporter for The Washington Post. He writes a wide range of news stories, narratives and profiles from local, national and foreign assignments, from the Academy Awards to Fallujah, Iraq. He joined The Post in 2005. [Follow](#) 

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