

IT'S ALMOST TOO PERFECT, THIS MOMENT - BUT for him, there's really no such thing. He's gliding west on Sunset Boulevard in his big black late-model Cadillac with tinted windows, straight toward an actual sunset blooming pink at the horizon. It's a glorious Saturday evening in West Hollywood, and why wouldn't it be? Bruno Mars has yet another song on its way to Number One, an arena tour all booked up, a girl he loves and absolutely no worries, nothing weighing on his mind. Except the idea of getting sick and canceling a show. He never could stand missing a show.

He bought the Cadillac - Bessie, he calls it - immediately after getting his first big check from his label. It's an old man's idea of a pop star's ride, but it suits him. Mars is an old-fashioned kind of pop star, a dimpled, sharp-dressed, elastic-voiced, lady-charming showman who would've been just as successful circa 1960 (though he'd have probably sung the word "motherfucker" less frequently). "I'm old-school," a random middle-aged dude told him at a bowling alley yesterday, "but you've got it."

Mars flips on the radio, tuned to a retro-R&B station playing Janet Jackson's "Nasty." He blasts it, singing along with the synth riff. "Jimmy Jam, right?" he says, correctly naming one of its producers. Mars' window is rolled down, and we hear a faint, feminine *Bruuuno!* from a passing car. "Run!" Mars says, flashing very white teeth. Unlike fellow stratospheric-pitch purveyor Geddy Lee, Mars doesn't speak like an ordinary guy: His voice is high, reedy and sufficiently euphonious that people have assumed he's a singer just from hearing him talk.

Over natty brown slacks, Mars is wearing a short-sleeve aloha shirt with flowers and birds on it - since he's from Hawaii, he can get away with it. On his feet are crocodile loafers (no socks, per usual); on his head is a brown fedora. He wears the hats largely to avoid dealing with his tightly curled hair, which has gotten long enough to do a Sideshow Bob thing.

Much like Jessica Alba, Mars is pan-ethnically, almost futuristically, good-looking: It's as if his face was designed by a focus group. The golden-skinned child of a Puerto Rican/Jewish dad and a Filipino mom, he never thought much about race in Hawaii. "Everyone's kind of mixed up there, kind of brown because it's sunny," he says. "So it was a shock for me when I came out here." He was taken aback when record execs had trouble categorizing him. "They were talking about 'What radio station would play this?' And it basically boils down to 'Who's gonna buy your albums? Black people or white people?'"

Senior writer BRIAN HIATT wrote the Louis C.K. cover story in RS 1181.

As traffic crawls on, he gestures across the street. "I used to live right down there, on Mansfield - it was really bad." That was nine or so years ago, when he first moved to L.A. One time, he recalls, he pulled up to his parking space and found it already occupied by a homeless guy. "It was a dude taking a shit in my stall," he says. "No toilet paper, nothing! It was just foul, and no one cleaned it up. So every morning, I got reminded of where I'm at."

Started from the bottom, now he's here - except Mars actually started closer to the upper-middle. He's 27 and has been in show business since he began impersonating Elvis Presley with his family's band at age two. That's a quarter-century of performing, which means he's got more stage experience than, say, Justin Timberlake - and his stagecraft-savvy parents put him through a homespun version of Motown's charm school literally from birth. His dad, Peter "Dr. Doo-Wop" Hernandez, recalled dimming the lights in the delivery room as his wife gave birth, so it was "almost like a nightclub," and playing "oldies but goodies" on a cassette boombox to usher Bruno - born Peter G. Hernandez - into the world.

At four years old, Mars appeared as a tiny Elvis in *Honeymoon in Vegas* and was interviewed by Pauly Shore on MTV. By age six, he had appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. Throughout grade school, he sang with his family's band in front of a packed

"For me, music is about 'I want to feel good,'" says Mars. "Ain't nobody trying to hear about my struggle to relate!"

club for two shows a night, expanding his repertoire to Frankie Lyman and Little Anthony. But around age 11, as he'll explain, it all went away. It's not a stretch to say he spent the past 16 years trying to get it back.

He pulls into an underground parking garage, and we're whisked up to the penthouse dining room of the West Hollywood branch of the members-only club Soho House, where he's given the best table in the place, under the branches of an olive tree. The sun has set, and the picture windows show most of L.A. - including his own house, somewhere in the Hollywood Hills - glittering beneath his feet.

Mars orders us each a cocktail that turns out to be not only supersweet but served in a *Sex and the City*-ready cosmopolitan glass. "Now we're really on a man date," he says. We both decide on the same fish entrée. "I'm gonna get the cod," he tells the waitress with a smirk, "and my boyfriend is gonna get the same thing."

When Mars' onstage assurance spills over into real life, he can come off as charmingly cocky: the hardest-working bro in show business. But he can also seem strikingly insecure, seeking approval in a manner that's maybe not surprising for a guy who grew up expecting two shows worth of applause each night. We've been talking for hours at Soho House when he suddenly asks me, in a soft voice, "Do you like the album?"

I tell him I do, and mean it - his style-hopping second album, *Unorthodox Jubilee*, is a leap forward from his debut, *Doo-Wops & Hooligans*, which was weighed down by soggy ballads.

But he's not satisfied: "Yeah? What songs?" He doesn't relax until I name four or five. Mentioning the surging sex jam "Gorilla" earns me a fist bump.

DDOUBLE TIME! HALFTIME! Break it down! It's not easy, these days, to find hip young musicians fluent in spit-shined, turn-on-a-dime Famous Flames-style dynamics - but many of the guys in Mars' fiery eight-piece touring band grew up playing in gospel churches, where those skills are still mandatory. A few hours before our dinner, Mars puts his guys' chops to the test in a Hollywood rehearsal studio, burning through a large chunk of the set for their upcoming tour. "Don't it feel good, baby," Mars croons in his silken tenor, as they ease into a vamp. He starts hyping up the nonexistent audience: "Does it feel good on the left side? What about the right side now?"

The band's flashy drummer, a bearded dude named Eric Hernandez, is ever-ready to crash a cymbal or cut to silence at the slightest flick of Mars' arm - and he was Mars' easiest recruit: He's Bruno's older brother, who abandoned a 10-year

