



Jesse Sandoval

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

The indie-rock drummer turned chile roaster tells how his brush with death brought him back to life

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

You have three months to live.” Jesse Sandoval knew his lifestyle would catch up with him eventually, but this soon? The doctor’s words hit him like a slap in the face. He was only 38.

It was the culmination of a downward spiral that was sparked several years earlier when he was fired from the iconic indie-rock band, The Shins. He’d been the band’s drummer since its inception in 1996, and his bandmates were close friends for most his life.

In the years since his departure from the band, Portlanders came to know Sandoval as the friendly proprietor of the Nuevo Mexico food cart and for his roasted New Mexican Hatch chile pepper company, Los Roast.

But beyond the headlines and behind the numerous reviews lauding his New Mexican flavors, Sandoval has been quietly fighting for his life.

At age 7, Sandoval was strong enough to carry a bucket of water and therefore deemed old enough to start working.

His summers growing up were spent traveling between the cities, towns and tribal villages of New Mexico with his family’s convoy of concession stands and food-vending trailers.

“I would set up the food stand, run the gas lines, the electricity, make sure the stove was set up,” remembers Sandoval. “As I got older, I learned to cook.”

He worked for his mother and “Uncle Joe,” and they often reunited with dozens of relatives at festivals where everyone gathered to set up shop for the weekend.

His Peruvian mother cooked authentic New Mexican fare for her customers with skills handed down to her from her mother-in-law. At the heart of her food was the Hatch chile pepper, best grown in the cooked earth of southern New Mexico’s Hatch Valley.

When he was back home in Albuquerque, Sandoval was hammering away on the drums. He and three of his high school friends played

in a band called Flake Music. The band split when singer and songwriter James Mercer and Sandoval left as a duo, forming The Shins.

After gaining a few more band members, The Shins went on to hit it big, receiving a 2008 Grammy nomination and mainstream success. The band relocated to Portland from Albuquerque in 2002.

Along with rock stardom, came the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle. “I was never the partier per se,” says Sandoval. “You just eventually live that lifestyle because that is the lifestyle... if you talk to a lot of people in bands, it just becomes part of what you do.”

But partying like a rock star may be too much of a cliché for today’s youth. Sandoval says talking with kids in bands, he’s noticed they don’t seem to share the same affinity for drugs and alcohol held by previous generations of musicians.

“For me,” says Sandoval; “I’m shocked, because at that age, that’s what I was doing. We were drinking six packs at practice. Beer came with it.”

“What do you mean you don’t drink? That’s weird kid.”

Following a 2007 tour, the band’s front man, James Mercer decided to continue The Shins, but with new band members surrounding him. Mercer told Pitchfork magazine it was “an aesthetic decision.”

Sandoval says he was fired on what happened to be the same night President Barack Obama won his first presidential election.

“Once The Shins ended,” says Sandoval, “there’s just this series of personal losses of friendships and departure from a life that I had grown to love, playing music. I really, at a young age, just wanted to be successful as a musician. And to kind of see that end was really hard for me. I didn’t realize it while it was happening, how – not necessarily the lifestyle – but what had become a norm to me, was gone.”

“With James and Marty (Crandall) – I knew them since high school,” he says. “I didn’t really know how to process all that.”

Sandoval tossed his drumsticks aside and returned to his roots, opening Nuevo Mexico, a food cart offering the New Mexican food he learned to cook as a teenager.

The scarcity of his main ingredient, Hatch chile, drew Portland’s New Mexican transplants to his cart, but that same scarcity along with rising costs made the business a challenge. At one point, he says he realized, “Oh God, I’m sitting in my coffin.”

Marshall Berg, a fellow New Mexican who found Sandoval’s cart in his search for Hatch chile, was so impressed with the food he offered to help him out.

The two became friends, and in 2012 they launched a roasted Hatch chile pepper company called Los Roast. Before Sandoval closed his food cart for good, he continued to work the cart while he and Berg got their company off the ground, putting in long hours on both fronts.

After closing up the cart each night, he would drink.

“At 2, 3 in the morning, I just needed to get away,” he says. “And there it is again. It’s not necessarily the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle, but who am I sitting around with? It’s the bartenders, it’s the service industry, who are all just so excited to close the bar, and it’s like close the doors – drinking. And then it became very cyclical for me.”

He was slipping fast. He knew he had an addictive personality, but hadn’t really gravitated toward partying in the past, which he says may have contributed to his oblivion about his problem. He tried to clean himself up, he