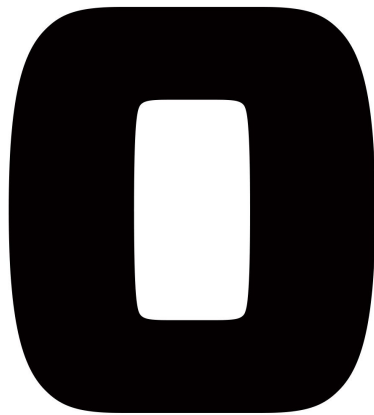
A close-up, high-contrast photograph of Batista's face. He has a shaved head, a short beard, and a nose ring. His eyes are wide and staring, and his mouth is open in a scream, showing his teeth and tongue. The background is a blurred, blue-toned arena setting.

WHEN ANIMALS ATTACK

Batista left WWE beaten and broken, but determined to achieve a new set of goals in the world of martial arts and the movies. And much like the path he took in WWE, he walked alone to new levels of personal success. *WWE Magazine* cornered The Animal during his intense training for his return to discover a man who truly knows exactly what he wants: namely, the WWE World Heavyweight Championship.



ur last image of Batista in WWE was that of *The Animal* sitting in a wheelchair in the middle of the ring under a spotlight quitting the company. This is our March issue, and much like that particular month you came into WWE like a lion and left like the proverbial lamb. Did going out like that bother you at all over these past three-plus years? I was really pleased with it. I thought it was good entertainment. I felt good about. I was really happy about it. Even though the way I went out was bitching and whining, it felt like a high note to me. I had accomplished a lot over that past three months with John Cena and I feel we really gave the fans their money's worth. A bad guy should go out on his back. It was so unlike anything I had done in the past. I soaked up every minute of it because I knew for that last nine months that I was going to be leaving. It was a blast. I had been with the company for 10 years, so having that feeling of doing something fresh and new really felt great. The downside of this was that I really did break my back in my last match.

Was returning to WWE something you always planned to do eventually? Or was it at one point not in your plans? It was always in my plans and it was something that I always wanted people to know that I was loyal to WWE. I was never going to forget where I came from. I actually wanted to come back sooner but there were things that I wanted to accomplish before I came back, which I was able to do.

How would you describe those years away from WWE? You seemed to try a lot of different things and really grow. It was rough because I didn't have offers for anything when I was leaving WWE. But I definitely had goals. The back injury set me behind a lot, about a year. And I finally had to

go in for back surgery, which I didn't want to have to do. But I had to.

What have you learned from your time away from WWE that you think will make you a better Superstar? Or better yet, during that time, what did you learn about yourself? I don't think that I learned anything new about myself because I was already older when I got into this business. I knew who I was. I knew my character, and I was comfortable with myself. The reason I left the company, and it was heartbreaking to do, was that I felt like I could accomplish things outside the company that I didn't have the opportunity to accomplish when I was here because I was on the road every week. I wanted to be a more well rounded entertainer and star and I wanted to bring more attention to WWE. That was kind of my big evil plan all along. I think there were some doubters, even high up in the company and I think I've proved them wrong.

It's been 10 years since your *WrestleMania* debut. Did 2004 Batista ever imagine becoming the man you are today—both inside and outside the ring?

Not even close. Even back then, I wasn't expecting everything that came about in 2005. It hit me in the face out of nowhere. It was one of those things that I think every WWE Superstar has that fantasy of being World Heavyweight Champion. At that time it wasn't attainable. I knew that people weren't looking at me as that guy and I wasn't sure how to get them to look at me that way. I kind of found it along the way, but it's also like I kind of stumbled into it.

How much WWE were you watching while you were away? Did you keep up? Did you force yourself not to watch? I watched the shows from time to time and when I could. I was always wondering if people would remember me. The longer you're away, the more you become forgotten. The business goes on without you... I know a lot of people love my entrance and my theme song and they've told me that they miss that... There were times even before I left, and I've discussed this openly, that I wasn't crazy with the direction the company was going. I didn't understand. I couldn't relate. I didn't get it. I grew up in The Attitude Era; that was what drew me back into wrestling. I was passionate about that time. Everything took a drastic change and I wasn't ready for it. I wasn't prepared and I fought it all along the way. I'm still fighting it.

There's some new "big guys" on the block since you've been gone, like Ryback and Big E Langston. But no one has quite filled the roll



of *The Animal* yet. What sets you apart from those other behemoths?

It's really not any fault of their own, but I was really fortunate. Look at the guys I was put under—Triple H and Ric Flair. What a blessing. I think those guys haven't had that opportunity and perhaps they'd be different Superstars if they did. I don't know what the answer to that is. I don't know what it was that made the audience connect with me.

What do you think that you can offer the current WWE landscape that's been missing? I hope I have something to offer. If I say I'm going to come back to be the savior, well, the company doesn't need saving. I'm just an addition. I'm going to bring my style of wrestling back, a little bit more aggressive and more explosive. I think I'm going to be coming back and bringing a little bit more attention with the projects that I've done outside the company. I'll pull my weight. I think I have the credibility and respect factor.

Is there anyone you're looking to settle a score with? Did you leave any unfinished business that has to be settled in the ring? That's the great thing about my career—I've



1. Batista bids a not so fond farewell to the WWE Universe; 2. *The Animal* attempts to make *The Champ* utter the words "I Quit"; 3. Celebrating with the I-C Championship, a title he has never won; 4. As Drax in this summer's *Guardians of the Galaxy* (the one between the racoon and the tree); 5. Pre-match prep.

pretty much worked with the best in the world and the best that's ever been...I've worked with Ric Flair and Triple H, Shawn Michaels, Undertaker, Eddie Guerrero. That's a short list. I've been in the ring with and faced off against The Rock. I've been in the ring with Stone Cold Steve Austin. There are new guys I'd like to work with in the future. I've said this for years, I wanted to be Undisputed Heavyweight Champion and now it seems more attainable than ever. That's my goal and that's my target. I'm not looking

at any one individual other than the person who is holding that title.

What are things you did to prepare yourself to step back into a WWE ring?

I spent a little time at NXT in the ring to get my body calloused again. The good thing is I never really stopped training. I love working out. I love martial arts, it's just kind of what I do, and I didn't leave and become inactive. One of the things that have my butterflies swirling is the electricity of the live audience.

There's just nothing like it. I always told people that WWE athletes are the closest to any athlete becoming a rock star. I don't think any other athletes really get to experience that. I know I have to prepare myself for that.

To you, what's harder: preparing for a role in a film like the upcoming *Guardians of the Galaxy* or a pay-per-view match in the ring?

The two of them, acting and WWE, couldn't be more different. To me, it's almost more of a claustrophobic thing because it's so much more intimate with acting. The WWE audience is just so big and so broad. There's so much energy. It's very stop and go. With WWE, it's not only a live audience but a fanatic audience. Audiences in the WWE Universe are very vocal. I'm not going to walk down the red carpet to a premiere with fans holding up signs saying, "You suck!"

What would your character in that film, Drax, be like as a Superstar?

You would be amazed by the similarities but maybe that's because of what I brought to the character. I could just relate to him. Drax is...you look at him and see one thing: He's driven. He has a lot of pain and hardship in his life and that's what drives him. It's kind of the same as me. I come from nothing. We were dirt broke when I was a little kid. I've always been driving and striving and ambitious to not be stuck in that. For different reasons Drax is driven in the same way. He's an emotional character; he's soft spoken at times and very aggressive at times. Drax also uses knives, those are his weapons and I've done Kali for years. It's funny; he's the big bald guy with tattoos that plays with knives. I think I was born to play Drax.

So how would the *Guardians of the Galaxy* stack up against another super group from WWE, namely *Evolution*?

They'd probably just stare at each other for a while and then go party somewhere.

Finally, what's your warning to the WWE locker room now that *The Animal* is out there hunting again?

I think that warning would go out to that one individual who holds the WWE World Heavyweight Championship. His time holding that title is very short. January 20th was when my hunt for that title began—and it won't end until I have it in my possession.