

Having spent six years as guitarist for post hardcore act Poison the Well, Derek Miller was ready to indulge some of his pop tendencies. His search would lead him to Alexis Krauss, and a new project called Sleigh Bells.

by Sarah Illingworth

Miller knew what kind of music he wanted to make, but needed a partner in crime, someone with a specific voice and persona. His quest took him from Florida to LA to New York, where he took a job waiting tables at a Brazilian restaurant in Brooklyn.

Krauss, a schoolteacher in the Bronx at the time, was dining with her mum at said restaurant one summer's day in 2008. For months Miller had been going up to total strangers and asking if they could sing, determined that one day he would find the girl he'd been looking for. When he put the question to Krauss, her mum cut in to assure him of her daughter's talent. Alexis and Derek exchanged emails, and she agreed to send him some of her work.

Little did Derek know that Alexis had been working as a songwriter and vocalist for some time, a history that included a stint as lead singer and bassist for the girl group Rubyblue. The act had moderate success in the US in the early 00s, but the demise of their record label, Edel, meant their run on the pop circuit was short-lived.

Impressed by Krauss' vocal tone and obvious talent, Miller realised he'd finally found his dream vocalist. Having reached him by phone on a precious day off, I ask what kept him pushing to find the perfect girl, to stay true to his idea of what Sleigh Bells could be - no matter how long it took.

"I don't really want to do anything else with my life besides play music, and so that was that," he replies. "I just figured that if I didn't find someone I would just, not to be dramatic, but I was like, 'well I guess I'll just die trying. I'll just wait tables and keep going out and asking, looking for people, and I'll just never stop.' I can't believe I actually found the person that I was looking for, because it just felt impossible, you know?"

It might be obvious from Miller's relentless approach to finding Alexis, but Sleigh Bells do not sleep on opportunity. After a live performance at CMJ in October 2009, one of their first ever shows, the act were immediately dubbed the festival's hottest ticket by a number of industry observers, including Pitchfork and the New Yorker. The hype machine kicked into overdrive. Not bad for an act whose live show is backed by an iPod.

The most cataclysmic turning point was not a great live review however, but a seemingly innocuous post on Spike Jonze's blog for Where The Wild Things Are. After hearing some of the band's demos, Jonze played them to his buddy M.I.A. The renowned vocalist loved what she heard and contacted Sleigh Bells immediately, saying she wanted to sign them to her label, N.E.E.T. Recordings. Thus, Sleigh Bells ended up on the N.E.E.T. roster, in a collaborative deal with New York based indie Mom+Pop Records.

Before Miller even had a chance to prove



SLEIGH BELLS ROCK THE BELLS

himself as a producer by bringing Sleigh Bells' early demos to a state of completion, M.I.A. asked him to produce a track for her new album. The result of the pair's session together, 'Meds And Feds', appears on M.I.A.'s third album *Maya*, which was released in July this year.

"It was great, she's a really amazing artist," says Miller of working with the groundbreaking performer. "And a really, really great person. She works rapidly, just always has a million ideas, and is very inspiring, and fun."

Sleigh Bells were pretty swift themselves when it came time to record their own album. In early 2010, not long after signing to N.E.E.T., they began work on their debut LP *Treats*. As the story goes, Krauss and Miller finished the album on

mash up that works for them.

Having had such a clear idea of the kind of vocalist he wanted for Sleigh Bells, what was it about Krauss that Miller connected with in the first place? "[She has] a really amazing, unique voice, [that's versatile]," he responds. "She can sound really sweet, and she can also sound kind of vicious - and I like that."

I ask why he left Poison the Well, a band he was part of from the age of 16-22. What was it that drove him to explore a new direction in sound? "Just growing, just like anybody," Miller replies. "You don't listen to the same records that you listened to when you're 28 as when you were 20. So, yeah, I just kinda grew out of it. [I] needed to do something different."

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a Saturday and it was available (exclusively) on iTunes the following Monday.

In the studio, says Miller, he and Krauss quickly developed a collaborative working relationship. As producer, Miller drafts out the bones of a track, then he and Krauss work together to flesh it out. "Creatively I'm pretty dominant, and I really know exactly what I want most of the time," he tells. "So, [recording] usually consists of me just working on a track all day, and then [Alexis] will come in late afternoon or evening, and start laying down vocals."

"She's really quick, she's really good. I'm the one that takes forever," he adds, laughing.

Listen to album cuts like 'Rill Rill', 'Infinity Guitars' and 'Crown On The Ground' and you'll agree his perfectionism paid off. The Sleigh Bells sound is hard to define, but Krauss and Miller both like it that way. The noise pop meets hardcore meets lo-fi meets... well, M.I.A., collision is clearly a

Miller already has a bunch more song ideas he's itching to work on, although he acknowledges it might be a while before he and Krauss have time to develop them. Over the next few months there'll be more shows, more tours - including, possibly, a trip to New Zealand. "We're working out the details now," assures Miller. "But we're going to get over there pretty soon. I'm really psyched for it."

Treats is out now.

Website: infinitybells.com

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