

Song Exploder
Sleigh Bells - I Can Only Stare
Episode 99

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("I Can Only Stare" by SLEIGH BELLS)

Hrishikesh: Sleigh Bells formed in 2008, and in 2016, they released their fourth album, *Jessica Rabbit*. In this episode, Alexis Krauss and Derek Miller break down their song "I Can Only Stare." I interviewed the two of them in front of a live audience at the Kaufman Music Center in New York as part of the Ecstatic Music Festival.

("I Can Only Stare" by SLEIGH BELLS)

(Music fades)

Derek: I'm Derek Miller. I'm from Sleigh Bells, and I do all the music and lyrics.

Alexis: Hi, I'm Alexis Krauss, other half of Sleigh Bells. Singer, melodies, harmonies, songwriter with Derek.

Derek: The early demo of this song sounded a lot more like shoegaze-y. I was at home in my apartment in Brooklyn, just kind of layering guitar parts.

(Guitar)

Derek: That immediately reminded me of like a Johnny Marr type of chord progression.

("Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now" by THE SMITHS)

Derek: That longing, that ache, you know, that a lot of the Smith's records have, a lot of the records from that period that I really like. So I was really just kind of trying to rip him off.

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Alexis: We each write in very private spheres. I mean, Derek works at home, and then he'll send me material and I'll work at home.

Derek: That's actually my favorite part of the process, is getting her the instrumental and seeing what I get back first.

Alexis: I love that challenge of trying to think of a melody.

Derek: The second I heard you sing the chorus, the "I can only stare,"

(Vocals: "I can only stare, I can only stare")

Derek: when you hit the A, when she hits that vowel, there's, it's like at the top of her range. And with that lyric, and with the melody, and the delivery, immediately, it was like one of my favorite things that we had ever done. We worked on this track for a long time.

Alexis: The first few demo versions didn't have verses.

(Demo: "I can only stare, I can only stare / (You see, it's pulling my heart down, it's pulling my heart down) / I'd like to go back there but I can / I can only stare, I can only stare")

(Demo fades)

Alexis: It really wasn't even until later on that somebody brought to our attention like, "Hey guys,

Derek: "Hey, this needs verses."

Alexis: "this song doesn't have [laughter] any verses [laughter]."

Derek: That's sort of a way that we cop out of writing like a proper, and complete, and satisfying arrangement, is like, "This'll just be like a minute and a half thing. This could be like an interlude."

Alexis: Derek had some really quality lyrics that we just hadn't used.

Derek: I mean, the song is about isolation and loneliness, you know? It's kind of about like the ache, but the good ache that you have from, you know, admiring somebody or something from afar, whether it's for five minutes on the subway,

you know? I mean, how many of us have fallen in love on the subway? And you see somebody, and you're like, "I could make that person happy. They would make me happy.

(Audience laughter)

Derek: Everything would be great." And you get to live in that little fantasy for, you know, for a couple of minutes. But I would never, ever sing this song, like even though I wrote the lyrics. But coming from somebody like Alexis, I don't know, for some reason, it's interesting to me.

Alexis: Derek reveals a lot of himself to me through his lyrics. It's kind of like having a conversation with him that we never had, but I get to see it. Because I don't think much of myself as a lyricist, and I certainly couldn't ever write lyrics for Sleigh Bells songs. Derek is able to, I think, give a lot more lyrically, because he doesn't have to stand on stage, and sing those lyrics, and feel that vulnerable. And I think I'm able to perform them much differently, because they're not coming from my own mind, and I don't feel self-conscious. And some people think that's disingenuous of me, but, for me, as someone who's always worked as a session singer, and has been comfortable singing other people's music, it allows me to occupy a space that I don't think I could occupy if it was my own. That is one of my favorite parts of the process, was kind of stepping back, and reading them, and then trying to sort of mine my favorite parts.

Derek: There was this couch in the old studio that we recorded in, and I'd always see her over there with her phone held to her mouth, like cupping it, looking really just like a total freak.

(Audience laughter)

Derek: And that was always a good sign, because I knew that she had something.

Alexis: So this was me sitting, whispering into my iPhone.

(Voice memo)

Derek: So the verses for me are like almost intentionally juvenile. Like there's sort of a romantic quality to the way that, you know, young kids, view crushes. It's that, you know, it's either the beginning of the rest of their lives, or it's the end of the world for them.

Alexis: I wanted to create something that sounded like your heart was really sinking, and that you were desperate and sad.

(Voice memo)

(Beat joins)

(Voice memo fades)

Derek: The verse drums are pretty orthodox. They serve their purpose. They're clean, they're simple. I think there's too much reverb on them.

(Beat ends)

Derek: But it's done, and the

(Audience laughter)

Alexis: This is actually a song that Derek *likes*.

(Audience laughter)

Alexis: You should hear what he says about songs that he doesn't like.

Derek: [laughter]

(Audience laughter)

(Beat)

Derek: The chorus kick drum takes up a lot of room in the speakers and in the frequency, you know, it just swallows up a lot of the frequencies. It's just kind of like caveman shit, like the chorus needs to be louder, put a bigger, louder kick drum on it. It's like not, it's not clever at all.

(Audience laughter)

(Beat)

(Synth)

Derek: The verse synths, I wanted to get right. Bright, almost like Yamaha DX7 style, which was a synth that was *really* popular in the mid to late 80s. You've definitely heard it. Almost like cloying synth patches that I really like. I was digging around, and I found the patch, and I was like, "Oh my God, it sounds like Amy Grant, 'Baby Baby.'"

("Baby, Baby" by AMY GRANT)

Derek: When I was 10 years old, this was like my favorite song. And I still reference these synth patches in my head.

("Baby, Baby" by AMY GRANT)

Derek: This is not ironic. This is, it's not a pose. I'm dead serious. I really love that track.

(Music fades)

Derek: But I'm a big fan of distortion and I think anybody that listens to our band is aware of that.

(Synth)

Alexis: Both of our ears were sort of craving that sort of weight, and gravity, and menacing quality that those synths have.

Derek: Definitely sort of offset what I felt like was something that was sweeter. There's sort of like a sweet, innocent quality to having your heart broken as a kid, but like very real isolation is, it's dreadful, it's a prison. And that synth is, you know, it's extremely oppressive, so

Alexis: You hear that, and you sort of brace yourself, that you're about to hear something heavy.

(Vocals with synth: "I can only stare into the field for so long / I can only stare into the field for so long")

Alexis: This was one of the first songs where we captured a much different vocal quality and delivery. You heard me sing in a different range, and register, and emoting more, pushing my voice more.

("Rill Rill" by SLEIGH BELLS)

Derek: The first record we made a point of not emoting. There was a lot of, "Just make it dead." "Can you do it more lifeless?"

Alexis: When we would track those songs, I would stand as still as possible.

("Rill Rill" by SLEIGH BELLS)

(Music fades)

Alexis: You know? Just like not move a muscle, whereas "I Can Only Stare," is the opposite of that. It's a full, physical delivery and performance. It's hard to breathe after.

(Vocals: "Why won't you let me come over / And do what you want me to?")

Alexis: It's hard for me to sing, as far as stamina goes, for sure. I mean, it is a fatiguing vocal, because it is existing in a certain part of my voice, which requires me to push a lot of air. It's a part of my range where I'm switching registers, so it definitely has that sort of natural cry to it.

Derek: This is the first song in eight years of writing songs together, where I changed the key of the song to accommodate her range, just because, really, it comes down to how that A sounds in "stare."

(Vocals: "I can only stare, I can only stare")

Derek: Writing a song like this is very hard for us.

Alexis: We could've left it a bit half-baked, because we didn't feel confident enough to fully execute it.

(Guitar)

Alexis: And, for me, it was just really a lesson in paying attention to detail, really listening to every little moment, every little harmony, every kick, every synth, every layer.

Derek: At the time, I feel like this was us maxing out our potential, creatively. Not something that happens every day for us. As long as I feel like we're sort of inching our way up quality-wise, as long as I believe that, then I'm pretty, pretty happy.

(Guitar)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "I Can Only Stare," by Sleigh Bells, in its entirety.

("I Can Only Stare" by SLEIGH BELLS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this song, and to learn more about Sleigh Bells. I've also posted the video on the site. Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, and is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.