

Rolling Stone

'My Friend Dahmer': Inside Movie Adaptation of Serial Killer's Teen Life

Derf Backderf on his classic graphic novel, why he's excited Disney star Ross Lynch will play his infamous friend



Disney star and R5 singer Ross Lynch stars in the movie adaptation of 'My Friend Dahmer,' about serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Brian Rasic/Getty

At night, Jeffrey Dahmer dreamt about having sex with corpses. Then he got up, went to school and proceeded with his day as a fairly typical suburban teen in small town Ohio. He had a group of friends. They found him slightly odd, but amusing. He rode around in Chevys and rooted for the Seahawks. He even took a girl to prom. Life was pretty normal for Dahmer, until his urges came to a head two weeks after his high school graduation. For Dahmer's former classmate and cartoonist John "Derf" Backderf, that's where the story ends. The rest is truly history.

In 2012, Backderf turned this story into a graphic novel, *My Friend Dahmer*, which was met with critical acclaim. Last week, the cartoonist was delighted to learn that Disney heartthrob and R5 singer Ross Lynch would portray his high-school-classmate-turned-serial-killer Jeffrey Dahmer in the book's film adaptation. It's an unprecedented career move for a Disney star to take a role like this, Lynch especially. The bleach-blonde actor spent the last five years singing and dancing as the lovable pop star Austin Moon on the hit Disney series *Austin and Ally*. However, the upcoming film has a unique perspective that might just make Lynch the perfect choice.

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Jeffrey Dahmer poses for booking photographs at the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department in a 1982 arrest for indecent exposure, several years prior to the discovery of his serial murders. Ralf-Finn Hestoft/Getty

While the real-life Jeffrey Dahmer went on to rape, murder and eat pieces from 17 male victims, you won't see Lynch filleting human body parts anytime soon. By ending the story on the eve of Dahmer's first kill, *My Friend Dahmer* seeks to explore an even scarier truth: How a troubled teenager who would later become the infamous serial murderer suppressed his desires and hid in plain sight. And Backderf thinks Lynch is perfect for the part.

"I think you're not going to be able to see the teen heartthrob in this role," explains Backderf, a celebrated political cartoonist and author of several best-sellers, including *Punk Rock and Trailer Parks*. However, *My Friend Dahmer* sent the Ohio-bred artist from underground comic to international best-selling author. "It [will be] a lot like the book, where you go into it expecting a certain thing and you get to the end and it's something completely different. It's not a slasher film – it's a very melancholy tale full of regret and remorse that shows this young kid spiraling into madness."

Indie filmmaker Marc Meyers (*How He Fell in Love, Harvest*) approached Backderf with an adapted screenplay that, like the book, is a coming-of-age tale. "I saw his other films and they had a humanity and a soft touch," Backderf explains .

According to Backderf, the film will adhere closely to the original cult comics from the early 1990s that were later published in 2012 as a graphic novel. Set against a 1970s suburban backdrop, the story is far from courtrooms and prison cells. Instead, you experience Dahmer in the backseat of Backderf's own Chevy Vega or in line for a burger at McDonald's. You see him pulling pranks and posing for picture day. However, the circumstances become increasingly strange as Backderf recounts him showing up to school drunk, stalking joggers in the woods and a bizarre act impersonating the disabled.

Considering how Disney has built an empire on wholesome characters, casting Ross Lynch in the role of Dahmer plays right into the unsettling normalcy that makes *My Friend Dahmer* so disturbing. "You're uncomfortable because it's so familiar," says Backderf on the phone from San Diego Comic-Con where he's promoting his **new graphic novel *Trashed***. "What I hear over and over is 'Oh, I knew a guy just like Dahmer.'"



Backderf, who created the graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer*, receiving a prize for "My Friend Dahmer" in France. Image of Derf Backderf: Pierre Duffour/Getty

Lynch spent his own adolescence acting on the Disney screen, starring in the popular *Teen Beach Movie* franchise. He currently sings in his family-oriented pop-rock band R5 and will soon appear in a Broadway production of *A Chorus Line*. For the fresh-faced 20-year-old who got his start performing with his brothers and sister at county fairs and Walmarts, playing a notorious murderer and necrophile doesn't exactly fit with the squeaky clean Disney image.

"I enjoy seeing the media react with surprise at his selection," says Backderf. "It reminds me of the reaction when *My Friend Dahmer* was first published. Really? A comic book about that? And then came the accolades and awards."

Lynch's ties to Disney will no doubt complicate perceptions of his role as Jeffrey Dahmer, which Backderf thinks will only enhance the effectiveness of his performance. "The story is discomfoting," he says. "That's just part and parcel of what the book is. Obviously [Jeffrey Dahmer] was unique, but there are lots of kids who fall between the cracks or off the edge of a cliff and end tragically. I think people will be uncomfortable, but tough. That's just part of the story."