

VOGUE

Ross Lynch Leaves Disney Behind With *My Friend Dahmer*

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by JOHN ORTVED



Ross Lynch likes Smash Mouth. We're in a small room at Karaoke Boho, a karaoke bar in New York's West Village popular among both locals and tourists (both of the celeb and norm-y variety) for late-night, less-than-mellifluous belting. It's slightly less popular at this moment because it's 4:00 p.m. on a Sunday, which may be the better time to release some demons: whether they be the secrets to getting inside the head of a serial killer who ate his victims, or the guilty pleasure that is loving bad '90s and early '00s pop partly made famous by Shrek.

Lynch—in a red leather Coach jacket with a black floral print snaking up the back—is in New York City for the Tribeca Film Festival premiere of his new film, *My Friend Dahmer*. It's the chilling story of the teenage Jeffrey Dahmer, one of America's most notorious serial killers, based on the graphic novel by Derf Backderf (an actual classmate of Dahmer's). The 21-year-old Lynch offers an

intimate portrayal of the confessed killer of 17 men and boys, whose crimes involved dismemberment, cannibalism, necrophilia, and the preservation of their skeletons. We get into that, but for the moment, Lynch is in a lighter place. He's showing me his pipes, admirably crooning his way through Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" and attacking Cage the Elephant's "Ain't No Rest for the Wicked." His musical preferences lean toward the sunnier. That's how we get on to Smash Mouth.



"The songs my band and I like to sing—the songs that the room will erupt for—are '90s hits, like 'All Star,'" he says. I tell him how funny it is that in 2017 the young, cool actors are into Smash Mouth. "No. Just that song," he says. "It's so fucking awesome. When I was, like, 6 years old, that was my jam. So now when we're all

hanging out in a karaoke bar, having a few drinks, it's just fun." (I get it. I like Alanis Morissette.) We all have our things. He reveals one more: "Another guilty pleasure is Shania Twain songs." Really? Lynch's casting as a psychopath is starting to make more sense.

My Friend Dahmer is a dark, terrifyingly sad departure for Lynch, who is known for his roles in Disney's *Teen Beach* movies and the house of mouse's TV show *Austin & Ally*. Young music fans and their parents will also recognize him as the lead singer of the band R5, whose pop songs, like "All Night" and "Smile," aren't exactly mired in misanthropy. Conversely, his portrayal of *Dahmer*'s alienated and frustrated teen is a nuanced dance in the darkest shadows. He brings us back from a tabloid fascination with a "serial killer" to a place of concern for a sick young man, coupled with the horror of knowing what's to come. It's a fascinating portrayal, and between songs and revelations of embarrassing fandom, Lynch told me how he got into the skin of one of the nation's most notorious killers; what it's like to leave Disney behind; and about his upcoming movie, *Status Update*, costarring Olivia Holt and Lynch's current IRL girlfriend, Courtney Eaton.

What attracted you to this role?

The fact that it was a serial killer. It was the becoming that was intriguing. He's slowly losing his humanity. He's being abandoned by his entire family, his friends. I think really deep down, he needed a companion. He actually said in an interview that the reason he was drilling into his victims' heads and putting chemicals in there was because he was trying to create a zombie for himself—something that was alive and functional that wouldn't leave him.

As an actor, this is such a departure for you. You're becoming a murderer. You're killing animals. You're masturbating violently in the dark. If that happened in *Teen Beach Movie*, I missed it. What's the appeal to doing something so different?

I love to do anything I haven't done before. I love variety. While I wouldn't say that I'm going to do another Disney TV show, I would like to do another comedy or something musical. But I like doing the dark independent stuff as well.

It's such an intimate, close portrayal. You are practically in every scene. What was your process for getting into character and becoming Dahmer?

It was a lot of research. It was a lot of watching him in his interviews and listening to what he had to say. A lot of it was his physicality—whenever I would slulk my shoulders and get into that posture, I was in his head at that point.

Who is Dahmer to you?

My version of Dahmer was his most human version. He was just a kid. Obviously, he had really scary urges, but he also tried to mute them through alcohol and other substances. He tried to stop. I see him in a sympathetic way—obviously I have much more sympathy for his victims and their families—but I feel like he could have been helped.

What's the last thing you killed?

It was probably a fly. I was writing a song in the studio, probably trying to think of lyrics, and it was buzzing in my face and, *whap*, I got it.

Who are you listening to these days?

My band makes pop music, so I try and stay in the loop with all that. One really cool act is called Mansionz. It's Mike Posner and his buddy. Hip-hop, too. There's this song by Big Sean and Chance the Rapper called "Living Single."

You're doing films. Your focus is currently on acting. Are you stepping away from music?

I'm doing both. The thing with acting is I'm at the liberty of someone who wants to book me. With music, I can do it all the time. With acting, I could, too, if I wanted to write a script and do that whole thing, but music is a constant thing. Acting, I have to audition.

Is your band scared you're going to just go be an actor?

No. I think they appreciate that I am an actor. They feed each other.

What's the best thing about getting away from the Disney thing?

It's more opportunity to do films I really want to do.

Tell me about making *Status Update*.

I just saw it, and it's actually really funny. And the polar opposite of *Dahmer*.

There's very little murder.

Very little. What was so great about that film was that we had a great script, but on set we really had the freedom to improvise. I like to go off the other actors in the scene, which kind of stinks when you're acting with someone who's not that great. But when you have people like Olivia Holt and Markian Tarasiuk, they're really great actors and we really feed off one another. That's the kind of acting I love, because you're just 100 percent in that moment.