

Partners - Robert Plant & Alison Krauss

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Robert: Yeah, that very thing, was the thing that used to make me go, "What's wrong with this woman?!" *(Alison laughs)*

("Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Hrishikesh: Robert Plant and Alison Krauss have made two albums together. Their first album, *Raising Sand*, came out in 2007 and won the Grammy for Album of the Year. Fourteen years later, they reunited for their second album, *Raise the Roof*. Robert Plant was the singer and front man of Led Zeppelin. He's in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and he won a Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2005. Alison Krauss is a multi-platinum artist who started out as a fiddle playing child prodigy. She's one of the top Grammy winners of all time. She has 27. On their albums together, Robert and Alison combine their individual rock and bluegrass sensibilities to reimagine songs. Their story began in 2003, when Robert was in the car listening to the radio.

Alison: My name is Alison Krauss.

Robert: And I am the long serving, suffering, Robert Plant.

A long, long time ago I was driving home from a local hostelry. And I heard this most beautiful voice. And a whole idiom of music that didn't really permeate the soundwaves in the United Kingdom. But I heard these beautiful tones and this beautiful voice and this innocence exuding a promise and an optimism, the likes of which I'd never heard before. The voice sitting opposite me. That's now looking at me with a very strange expression.

Alison: *(Alison laughs)* What? This is so...

Robert: And I pulled over on the side of the road. And Alison sang to me,

("Jacob's Dream" by Alison Krauss)

Jacob: About little children on the side of a hill *(Alison laughs)* who'd lost their sheep. And their parents were looking for them all night long, playing banjos.

Alison: That's a true story!

(*"Jacob's Dream" by Alison Krauss*)

Jacob: It just captivated me. I was enamored by her style and the lightness of her delivery.

I'd been invited to go to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio to celebrate the work of Lead Belly. To pay, kind of, homage in a way to him. I was able to reach out to Alison.

Alison: I remember I got a call from my manager at the time, and she goes, "Hey, Robert Plant is going to call you in five minutes." My brother used to play Led Zeppelin in his room and we had grown up listening to that music.

And so I said, "what does he want?"

She goes, "I don't know."

So at the time, I was putting my son to sleep, who was a little boy at the time. And so there, the phone rang and, "Hello, it's Robert!" And I had to be really quiet. I just was trying not to wake my son up. And so I had to go, "Hey, Robert. Yeah, it's really great. Nice to talk to you." And it was kind of, like, this really weird phone call. And then he asked about going and playing in Cleveland.

Robert: So we met in Cleveland in remarkable circumstances. I didn't know anything about how her world worked as a traveling musician. And she knew nothing about mine.

Alison: And we did the rehearsal at an Armenian dance hall. That was like stepping into another world. I thought, *this is one of the most incredible places I've ever seen*. It was like, just out of some Fellini movie or something,

Robert: Yeah!

Alison: Way back in the day. And I saw him standing in the corner with his hairdo.

Robert: My hairdo?! Wait a minute. (*Alison laughs*) Hang on. My hairdo is my business. Shit!

Alison: You know, and I walked up to him and he turns around and says, "Oh, there you are!" And the first conversation we had was about one of my favorite records by Ralph Stanley called *Clinch Mountain Gospel*. And he talked about, in the seventies, driving through the Appalachian Mountains, listening to that record.

And I thought, *how interesting!* I would have had no idea that he had that kind of connection to that world. And it was just great.

Robert: A very good first meeting because it allowed us to see what our personalities might be like, which is almost more important than where we go to as players. She's a very charming and humorous woman. We really did have some kind of, very unusual, unexpected affinity. And we took the stage and played some Lead Belly stuff and, well, let's just say, it was a work in progress. There was a little bit of floundering. Unfortunately, I didn't realize there was one or two really important aspects of singing with another person that I had yet to be considering. And that is, if I'm singing, what is the other person going to sing? And I've heard this talk, now, which has actually been drilled into me by Madam, about singing harmonies.

Alison: For singing a duet, depending on the range of the person that you're singing with, you're either singing one part above or two parts above.

Robert: But, you know, I just thought we'd just sing. I was sending it left, right and center with Alison screwing up that beautiful face and saying, "Why don't you sing the same thing twice? Because how, in heaven's name, am I supposed to sing along with you? If you're going, *(Robert Sings)* 'Baydoo, ooh well, mama, mama,' all over the place?!"

It was just really funny. But, you know, the great thing about it was even when it was going into some strange spiral of turmoil, Alison was laughing at me across her violin. And I think she thought I was a little bit nuts. *(Alison laughs)*

So that was the way that we started. Once upon a time in Cleveland. But whatever happened that night, set the scene for all the events that have followed it, really.

Alison: And the next time that we talked was about making a record. Robert called,

Robert: Again.

Alison: And he says, "Hey, let's get together and go in the studio for three days. Let's just give it a shot." And he said, "If it doesn't work, we'll just move on."

And I thought, *well, that sounds like fun!*

And I remember saying, "I don't want to produce it."

He says, "I don't want to produce it."

So I brought up T-Bone Burnett, who I had worked with a number of times on the *Oh Brother Where Art Thou? Soundtrack* and *Cold Mountain*. And he had an incredible respect for that kind of music, you know, bluegrass music and acoustic music. And I knew about his career with rock and roll. And he seemed like a perfect bridge. Robert loved the idea. T-Bone loved the idea.

Robert: T-Bone had suggested some particularly beautiful songs.

Alison: And sent us those. And then we got together in Nashville. And, I have to admit, I was nervous how we were going to do it because there were so many unknowns of, what in the world? You know,

Robert: Yeah.

Alison: How it was going to work. Walking in with a blindfold on. I said to T-Bone, "Well, you know, you know, we got three days, we can see how it goes and, you know, no more commitment after that."

And he says, "Oh, we'll get it done." He goes, "This is going to work." And he was very confident. And he had said, T-Bone said, "Well, my goal is to make you both very uncomfortable."

And I'm like, "Boy, that sounds like a joy. Can't wait to get in the studio." (*Alison laughs*) But he wanted us to not be doing something we'd already done. And two or three days before we went in to track, we did a lot of rewriting; trading those leads and harmony parts around. And some of the melody lines where we would switch, you know, from Robert singing lead to me singing lead and then he would jump to harmony. And I thought that was a really beautiful idea.

Robert: We're not trying to create something where our egos are being looked after by making sure that I get my bit in and Alison gets her a bit in. It's not always going to be both of us singing. It's not always going to be either of us backing the other up.

Alison: For myself and for Robert, it was a totally new way of singing together. You know, he is very off the cuff and I grew up in a very regimented style of singing. And you know, to bring those things together can be,

Robert: Interesting.

Alison: Yes! Robert's attitude was, "Let's just go in and try." And so, for myself, that's the first time I'd ever recorded like that.

Robert: With Alison, I was learning. I was going into an area that, kind of, worried me and frightened me, and still does. And I follow her angles when it comes to harmonies and stuff like that. Which, in the past, would be something that I would consider to be unattainable because it's never been in my world at all.

Alison: The boundaries of that atmosphere, with the three of us in there and that group of musicians, I mean, it was a group think. And we ended up, really, kind of, giving a new life to those songs.

Robert: You could suggest a song and play the original version and just get a feel for it. If it came from 1953, or whatever it was. For example, "Rich Woman," originally by Li'l Millet, down in New Orleans.

("Rich Woman" by Li'l Millet and His Creoles)

Robert: That's such a sexy piece of music. I mean it's just incredible in its original form. If we didn't have the right guys there, musicians who were on the studio floor, it would have sounded lumpy and it would have been like, "Oh, this is, this is not going to work." But instead it was, like, incredibly alluring, the groove that was created.

("Rich Woman" by Alison Krauss & Robert Plant)

Alison: I'm pretty sure we were already talking about making another record while we were touring the first one.

Robert: Yeah.

Alison: You know, I never played with amps like they had on stage. You know, everything for me in the past was, you know, very low volume, I could hear everything. And when we were on the road (*Alison laughs*) and they would throw a new song in at the last second. There were enough elements, on my end, that I felt could go wrong. And then they'd want to throw a new song in there. And I'm like, "Oh, you guys can, maybe, we just, you know,"

Robert: Yeah, that very thing was the thing that used to make me go, "What's wrong with this woman?!" (*Alison laughs*) I mean, surely, expression is everything! If you can take your violin towards the amplifier (*Alison laughs*) to get a little bit of feedback and then, perhaps, put your violin bow across the string.

Alison: I'll just stick the mic right in front of the amp.

Robert: Yeah, that, see! She's waiting to come out. Alison Krauss comes out. (*Alison laughs*)

Alison: His spontaneity when he sings is so different than my whole mentality through the years. I got really fascinated with being able to sing something 10 times and be able to piece something together. And then, you know, he'd get in there and just throw down. And it was all about, "Right now. Right this second. This is about capturing this moment in time." And it was really a wake-up call for myself, you know, about really being present and authentic.

Robert: I was a typical English rocker, so to end up being encouraged and enamored by her meticulous vision of various parts of certain songs was quite an experience for an old dog. I found it was incredibly rewarding, musically. And we had, actually, started to soldier a really great affinity between us. A friendship, which doesn't have to be propped up by anything at all.

Alison: The whole thing was a surprise from, just, beginning to end. To have that whole thing wrapped up with such an unexpected ending was, you know, just really remarkable, really.

Robert: The Grammy's?

Alison: Yeah. Yeah.

Robert: Now we can fly between the great work of Calexico and the lost works of Geeshie Wiley. You know, there's no boundaries to where we can go because we're actually, we're almost translators in this situation, I think. So as long as there are songs that people have never heard on my jukebox or in my record collection or in Alison's, then we've got a relationship and a gig together!

("Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Hrishikesh: Robert Plant and Alison Krauss are partners. Their two albums, *Raise the Roof* and *Raising Sand*, are available everywhere. You can find them online at plantkrauss.com or [@plantkrauss](https://twitter.com/plantkrauss).

Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I've produced and edited this episode and made the theme music. Maureen Hoban is my co-producer. And Chloe Parker and Casey Deal are the production assistants. Kathleen Smith handled music clearance. *Partners* is a Mailchimp podcast made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.