

On the importance of taking your time



Musician Molly Rankin (Alvvays) discusses challenging yourself, treating everything like it's the last thing you're going to make, and not reading the comments.

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As told to Matt Mitchell, 1917 words.

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That five years have passed since your last album, *Antisocialites*, and the new one *Blue Rev*, wasn't intentional. What was it like for the band after having your demos stolen and then seeing a flood almost wipe out your equipment? I can only imagine what kind of havoc having your own creative work taken from you might wreak on someone emotionally.

It was very unsettling. I didn't think for a second that I was targeted in any way. I think it was just a random product of someone seeing an opportunity and grabbing whatever they could find. And years of work happened to be what that was. But, as far as equipment, we didn't actually lose anything. I had a bunch of friends over the day after I was broken into and we were all hanging out, and then this wild flood in Toronto happened. Water started gushing into the basement and we were all just grabbing the fabric we could find and absorbing all of this water. So everything was elevated and mostly safe beyond a couple of patch cords. Luckily, we didn't lose anything. I think, if that were to happen, I might actually have to rethink why I'm doing what I'm doing. But, no, we just kept going forward. We do take a lot longer to make things anyway, so the pandemic and having [drummer] Sheridan [Riley] in the US, it was all kind of a logistical nightmare.

I remember—in maybe 2020, early 2021—I started seeing a lot of tweets from music fans saying, "There's gotta be a new Alvvays album coming out," and I'm like, "Well I feel like there's probably a good reason why there's not a new album yet." Having your demos stolen and also navigating a pandemic are two pretty solid reasons for that.

I'm just also not that prolific. I'm really hard on myself. If something doesn't speak to me, I'd rather just bury it. So it's partly that, too. I'm not a perfectionist, but I'm tough on my own work.

I think that's part of the job description of being an artist, to have a narrower eye on your own stuff that you make. Like you said, you don't think the intent was to steal the demos because they knew it was you, but I'm curious if they will appear in the future for sale somewhere, once someone realizes what they have.

Yeah, it's probably going to be some memory card that's corroded in a sewage pipe, but it also could be on the internet at some point and it will be non-stop hours of me howling at the moon.

Does the idea of Alvvays look any different now than it did when you released the self-titled album in 2014?

I don't have several jobs now, which I did when we released that record. So I do have the means to be creative and that means a lot. I realize that's a very fortunate situation to be in, so I definitely don't take that for granted. We've all, generally, gone into this situation knowing that it could be our last try. So, we've put everything into our records and look at it like that because life is short and music is so unstable and hard to

predict. I think my mindset has been the same, to have that hungry chip on your shoulder and make everything like it's your last thing.

I'm curious about the title of your new album, *Blue Rev*. It appears in the song "Belinda Says." What's the story behind that?

Well, Rev is a wine cooler, a Canadian thing. And the flavor that everyone drank when I was younger was blue, so it's a very specific cultural reference to my adolescence. I think it's something that a lot of people from the Maritimes could probably relate to. It was thought of, to me, as a portal going into the past and touching on some unique cultural references of where I grew up. It's sort of in the vein of strawberry wine, or something.

I've seen comment sections of your band's videos on YouTube and some people will say, "This is the most Canadian band I've ever seen," and I think it's fun that the new album leans even more into your guys' home.

If you're trying to wriggle out of that, it's kind of impossible, so why not lean in a bit?

Speaking of "Belinda Says," I know it's an homage to Belinda Carlisle, so I'm curious about what kind of influence the Go-Go's have on Alvvays.

We were watching [*The Go-Go's*] during the pandemic and it was really interesting, just the way that [the band] weren't exactly how they were framed. It wasn't a cookie cutter journey for them, so that was enlightening to me. And we love that song, "Rush Hour," too, by Jane Wiedlin. Her collaboration with Sparks, as well. You know, "Heaven Is a Place on Earth," it's just a classic, blasting jam. [Guitarist] Alec [O'Hanley] came up with that final line in the peak of ["Belinda Says"]. When he came up with that, we were high-fiving, because it just felt so perfect.

You started writing *Blue Rev* right after *Antisocialites* came out. Did the original demos for the record sound as dynamic four years ago as they do now, or is that evolution a product of being patient with reassembly and re-recording them directly to tape?

A little bit of both. Some of that stuff is pieced together, and we would redo everything from scratch, or try and inject some of the demo tracks into new skeletons. But, then you have so much time with things and you go back and forth between different versions, and sometimes you just don't capture the energy, the sound of the initial thought, or the sound of an idea forming. It has this unique air that, sometimes, can be really hard to pin down when you're really focusing on doing that. So there were things that we used that were just, like, me screaming in our practice shed that can't be recreated when you don't know that it's being recorded. Little moments like that just have this indescribable term.

The response to *Blue Rev*, from what I've seen so far, has been great. Tons of writers who've heard the record early are already calling it one of the best of the year. It being so long since you've put out an album, did you have to readapt to people responding to your work?

I have been kind of careful about subjecting myself to other people's opinions, because I'm all over the map and slightly fragile when it comes to those thoughts bouncing around in my head for a long period of time. So I do try to block a lot of stuff out, but this whole process has been a little bit foreign to me, just getting back on the interview train and even just playing music. The whole thing is zero to 100 again. It does actually feel really nice. I feel like the energy that I'm picking up on has been really positive, and that definitely helps when you're just trying to stay afloat with all of this stuff that needs to be done.

Beyond the overarching dream pop foundation, there are so many genres at play on *Blue Rev*. When you start writing a song, are you ever trying to fit into a certain box of a certain sound, or is it a more organic production?

Lots of different ideas that I'm thinking [about] when I'm writing. Sometimes, I'm just like, "This could be like 'Sparky's Dream,' or this could be a guitar version of a Celine Dion song, or something." It eventually doesn't

end up that way, but it sounds like our band. With this album, I know that one thing we all agree on is that we like loud guitars, and, so, it wasn't a conscious pivot, or anything planned. I think we were just drawn to certain approaches, subconsciously, and were trying to make everything pop and hit.

The visual components of your music have always felt perfectly tailored to the songs they represent. I think a lot about how captivating the videos for "Archie, Marry Me," "In Undertow," and now "Very Online Guy" are and how they so beautifully encompass the work. Are visuals something you actively think about when writing, or are those pastorals something that arise afterwards?

A bit of both. Part of my writing process is conjuring and drawing from imagery and making miniature films in my mind so I can describe them in words. But then, yeah, a lot of the visual stuff we try to be really involved with so it feels like it fits. And if it doesn't fit, then it just doesn't get used. So there have been a lot of things left on the cutting room floor, for sure. It's important to me that that realm is the appropriate accompaniment to the music, and it's not easy, just to find things that are in your palette and speak to you.

There was a sort of lingering melancholy on *Antisocialites*, but *Blue Rev* is often joyful and humorous. What was the inspiration for that metamorphosis in storytelling for you?

I think, with the first two albums, there were a lot of uncertainties in my life. And [now] I feel just, maybe, in a better place. Even though things aren't autobiographical, I think that energy translates. [With] *Antisocialites*, we were touring so much that I felt really overwhelmed. And there were a lot of health issues and keeping up with your family and missing out on things. That's kind of what being a musician is, making all of those sacrifices. But, when you grapple with that, it can be a painful thing. So, with this record, just having some time off to reconnect with other things in your life that aren't music was a really stabilizing thing for all of us. I also don't really want to fully be buying into the sad trope. It's starting to feel a bit like an overused party trick, or something. It's good to challenge yourself.

When you finished making the record, what was your initial reaction to the collection of songs you'd just put together?

It took some honing to make sure that it could all exist on one album, trying to tweak everything so the songs made sense back-to-back. Once that was accomplished, I felt like it was a successful collage of ideas and feelings and scenarios. It was satisfying to meet that balance with every peak and valley of the album.

Because you sat with these songs for so long, unintentionally, or not, do you ever think about how they will become a bridge to what the future holds next for you, musically? Or what kind of shape the next thing can now take?

That feels so daunting, just to even think of what could come next right now. I feel like I just have my head down and I'm swinging ferociously, so I'm gonna put that question on ice for a while.

Molly Rankin recommends:

Aki Kaurismäki's *Shadows in Paradise*

Lilys' *Eccsane the Photon Band*

Sophisticated Boom Boom w/ Sheila B on WFMU

J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*

Alice Munroe's *Runaway*

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□

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