

Alvvays never intended to take five years to finish their third album, the nervy joyride that is the compulsively lovable *Blue Rev*. In fact, the band began writing and cutting its first bits soon after releasing 2017's *Antisocialites*, that stunning sophomore record that confirmed the Toronto quintet's status atop a new generation of winning and whip-smart indie rock.

Global lockdowns notwithstanding, circumstances both ordinary and entirely unpredictable stunted those sessions. Alvvays toured more than expected, a surefire interruption for a band that doesn't write on the road. A watchful thief then broke into singer Molly Rankin's apartment and swiped a recorder full of demos, one day before a basement flood nearly ruined all the band's gear. They subsequently lost a rhythm section and, due to border closures, couldn't rehearse for months with their masterful new one, drummer Sheridan Riley and bassist Abbey Blackwell.

At least the five-year wait was worthwhile: *Blue Rev* doesn't simply reassert what's always been great about Alvvays but instead reimagines it. They have, in part and sum, never been better. There are 14 songs on *Blue Rev*, making it not only the longest Alvvays album but also the most harmonically rich and lyrically provocative.

There are newly aggressive moments here—the gleeful and snarling guitar solo at the heart of opener “Pharmacist,” or the explosive cacophony near the middle of “Many Mirrors.” And there are some purely beautiful spans, too—the church-organ fantasia of “Fourth Figure,” or the blue-skies bridge of “Belinda Says.” But the power and magic of *Blue Rev* stems from Alvvays' ability to bridge ostensible binaries, to fuse elements that seem antithetical in single songs—cynicism and empathy, anger and play, clatter and melody, the soft and the steely. The luminous poser kiss-off of “Velveteen,” the lovelorn confusion of “Tile by Tile,” the panicked but somehow reassuring rush of “After the Earthquake”.

The songs of *Blue Rev* thrive on immediacy and intricacy, so good on first listen that the subsequent spins where you hear all the details are an inevitability.

This perfectly dovetailed sound stems from an unorthodox—and, for Alvvays, wholly surprising—recording process, unlike anything they've ever done. Alvvays are fans of fastidious demos, making maps of new tunes so complete they might as well have topographical contour lines.

But in October 2021, when they arrived at a Los Angeles studio with fellow Canadian Shawn Everett, he urged them to forget the careful planning they'd done and just play the stuff, straight to tape. On the second day, they ripped through *Blue Rev* front-to-back twice, pausing only 15 seconds between songs and only 30 minutes between full album takes. And then, as Everett has done on recent albums by The War on Drugs and Kacey Musgraves, he spent an obsessive amount of time alongside Alvvays filling in the cracks, roughing up the surfaces, and mixing the results. This hybridized approach allowed the band to harness each song's absolute core, then grace it with texture and depth. Notice the way, for instance, that “Tom Verlaine” bursts into a jittery jangle; then marvel at the drums and drum machines ricocheting off one another, the

harmonies that crisscross, and the stacks of guitar that rise between riff and hiss, subtle but essential layers that reveal themselves in time.

Every element of Alvways leveled up in the long interim between albums: Riley is a classic dynamo of a drummer, with the power of a rock deity and the finesse of a jazz pedigree. Their roommate, in-demand bassist Blackwell, finds the center of a song and entrenches it. Keyboardist Kerri MacLellan joined Rankin and guitarist Alec O'Hanley to write more this time, reinforcing the band's collective quest to break patterns heard on their first two albums.

The results are beyond question: *Blue Rev* has more twists and surprises than Alvways' cumulative past, and the band seems to revel in these taken chances. This record is fun and often funny, from the hilarious reply-guy bash of "Very Online Guy" to the parodic grind of "Pomeranian Spinster."

Alvways' self-titled debut, released when much of the band was still in its early 20s, offered speculation about a distant future—marriage, professionalism, interplanetary citizenship. *Antisocialites* wrestled with the woes of the now, especially the anxieties of inching toward adulthood. Named for the sugary alcoholic beverage Rankin and MacLellan used to drink as teens on rural Cape Breton, *Blue Rev* looks both back at that country past and forward at an uncertain world, reckoning with what we lose whenever we make a choice about what we want to become.

The spinster with her Pomeranians or Belinda with her babies? The kid fleeing Bristol by train or the loyalist stunned to see old friends return? "How do I gauge whether this is stasis or change?" Rankin sings during the first verse of the plangent and infectious "Easy on Your Own?" In that moment, she pulls the ties tight between past, present, and future to ask hard questions about who we're going to become, and how. Sure, it arrives a few years later than expected, but the answer for Alvways is actually simple: They've changed gradually, growing on *Blue Rev* into one of their generation's most complete and riveting rock bands.